



I, CHRISTINA

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PRELUDE

We are cast from Eden's gate with no regrets
Into the fire we cry
I'd Die For You - Bon Jovi

I awoke in a darkened alley to a horrible thirst, a terrifying hunger. It was neither. It was both. It was completely devastating.

I didn't know where I was or how I came to be there. I recognized nothing around me, not even the clothing I wore. Suddenly I panicked – I didn't even know who I was! I didn't know my name, my parents, my friends or where I was from; I didn't remember anything about myself at all.

I looked around to see that I was lying in the darkness behind a dumpster. I stood slowly, brushing the dirt from my clothes. I was wearing black jeans, white tennis shoes and a plain blue tee shirt. When I shoved my hands in my pocket to look for some kind of identification, all I pulled out twenty-eight dollars and some loose change.

Then I noticed a bracelet on my wrist. It was delicately made of silver and shimmered in what little light filtered into the depths of the alley from the street. I spun the chain on my wrist and realized it was an identification bracelet. I held the tag up to the light and knew my name: Christina.

Somehow I knew the words for things I saw and the meanings behind them, but I had no idea how I had learned them. I searched my memory and realized that I knew concepts and ideas, but nothing related to myself, nothing personal. Not even the slightest glimmer of a memory surfaced.

My head began to ache with the strain of trying to remember. I felt a hunger tearing at my insides and since I had no idea when I'd last eaten, I thought I'd better find some food.

I walked out of the alley and onto a brightly lit street. There were neon lights flashing everywhere, and the street was nearly as bright as day. Casinos, hotels and people lined the strip. I could be only one place: Las Vegas.

I had no idea how I had gotten there, and no recollection of ever having been there before that night. To all extents and purposes, my life began the moment I woke alone in the alley.

Across the street a long white limousine pulled up. I watched the driver walk around and open the door for his passengers. A tall dark man stepped out who in turn helped a beautifully dressed woman exit the car, but it was the man who caught my eye.

He was impeccably dressed and seemed to carry himself with the dignity of another age. His straight long dark hair glistened in the neon lights, almost as if it had a life of its own. He moved with grace and precision as he stepped onto the curb. He appeared to be young, around thirty or so, but when I saw his eyes I knew he must be much older. He stopped for a moment and looked me up and down. Then he nodded politely to me and turned to escort the woman into the hotel.

I watched the crowd ebb and flow for a few minutes, but my hunger burned deep inside of me. I had to find something to eat.

I turned and began walking down the street, looking at every person who passed and wondering if I knew them. I was frustrated with amnesia and starting to get more than a little frightened.

After a while, I found a fast food stand on the sidewalk and got into line. I ordered a drink and a burger and took them to a nearby table where I sat down and took a small drink of the soda. My stomach rolled, but the hunger still seemed to consume me. I tore the wrapper from the

burger and took a bite, trying to ignore the nausea that washed over me from just the smell of the food.

Suddenly I bolted for the trash barrel next to the table and vomited what I'd just eaten. Blood seemed to be mixed with the bile and I vomited again, more blood. I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand and backed away from the barrel. I was obviously sick; was I dying?

People were staring at me and I turned to run through a nearby alley, exiting onto a quieter street. I could smell the blood in the people passing me and it made me feel ravenous again. When I thought about buying more food, my stomach lurched. *No*, I thought firmly, *no more food*.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw the dark haired man from the limousine standing across the street watching me. I kept walking trying to pretend I didn't see him and in moment I had passed him by. I felt his eyes on me the entire time.

A few blocks later I saw him in front of me again, leaning against a light pole. I couldn't figure out how he had gotten ahead of me or why he was following me. Again I passed him, and again he appeared a block or so ahead of me and across the street. I walked past quickly.

Who are you? I heard a strange voice ask.

I stopped and looked around but no one was close to me. The voice had seemed to come from inside my head.

Have you no respect for the Prince? I looked behind me and saw the mysterious gentleman standing near the street and watching me intently. *Why have you not shown yourself to her?*

Frightened, I turned and ran down first one alley, then another, darting around obstacles and searching for a place to hide. I reached a darkened spot and backed into a doorway out of sight. Leaning back against the doorframe, I slid to the ground, covering my face and giving in to my tears as quietly as I could.

After a time, I lifted my head and brushed away the tears. I started to wipe my hands on my jeans and realized they were covered in blood. I touched my cheeks and looked at my hands again. I was crying blood! Vaguely I thought I had to get to a hospital, that I must be dying. I peeked out, looking for the man who had been following me but he was nowhere to be seen. I leaned back against the building and looked up at the slice of sky I could see between the buildings. What was happening to me?

A few minutes later I heard a voice say "Miss, are you alright?" It was one of the Las Vegas street people, a woman, standing a few feet away from me. "Is there something I can do for you? You look like you're hurt."

I looked at my bloodstained hands and laughed nervously. "I think I'm dying."

As she moved closer, the hunger bloomed inside of me and I started to cry again. The woman walked over to me, crouched down and placed a hand on my shoulder. The warmth of her hand burned through my tee shirt.

I looked up at her and suddenly the craving within coupled with the scent of the woman's blood was overwhelming. I put my arms around her and buried my face in her neck. As her arms went around me, I could feel my canines grow and I sank them, long and knifelike, into the woman's flesh. She didn't even try to fight me.

I was horrified! I was exhilarated! I drew blood deeply from her veins, feeding the hunger that had tormented me from the moment I had woken. The woman began to waver in my arms and still I could not stop drinking. I felt the heart inside her chest slow, hear her breathing ease.

I couldn't stop, I drank until the woman was dead in my arms and I could drink no more. Then I licked at the wound to get the last possible drop and watched in amazement while the wound closed as if it had never been.

Suddenly realizing what I had done, I dropped the woman to the ground and stood unsteadily. I put a hand to my mouth and felt the fangs, sharp and bloody. "I'm a vampire," I whispered, looking down at her body.

I turned and ran, faster than I would have ever thought I could run. I went down street after street randomly with no destination in mind, only knowing that I must get away from the body in the alley, the woman I had killed to satisfy the hunger within. Near dawn I found myself in a rundown part of the city. I climbed into the basement of an abandoned house and crawled into a closet. I made sure the door was closed tightly behind me to keep out the sun and I slept the sleep of the dead.

The next night when I rose, the hunger rose with me. It was not nearly as overwhelming as it had been the previous night, but it was there just the same. I felt sure that I would not have to feed that night or possibly even the next, but I knew that before too many nights passed the blood would call to me so strongly that I would not be able to resist.

I climbed out of the basement and made my way back toward the lights of the main strip. In an alley I washed the worst of the blood from my jeans with water dripping from a drainpipe. Then for hours I walked and watched the people and I wondered what life had been like for me as a mortal.

Then I saw him again, the gentleman who had followed me and spoke into my mind. I backed into a shadowed doorway hoping to hide from his dark gaze.

Why do you hide from me? I heard his voice speak in my mind. *Perhaps you fear punishment for breaking the Masquerade?*

"Masquerade?" I whispered. "What?" I shrank further into the doorway and closed my eyes.

Suddenly I bolted, darting through traffic to enter a side road, but he was there before me. I ran back in the other direction, crossing the busy traffic again, and he gave chase.

I ran for what seemed like miles, down one street after another, but he was everywhere I turned. He seemed to be playing with me, staying just far enough behind to give me hope that I had lost him, then suddenly appearing in front of me. I started going down alleys, trying to lose him in their concealing darkness.

After darting down a particularly dark alley, I moved around a corner and froze. I listened carefully to see if he was still following, but I didn't hear him. Looking about, I saw a fire escape above me.

I glanced quickly down the alley, then climbed the ladder to the roof and ran along its edge. A gap loomed in front of my feet and I nearly fell as I jumped to the next building. I ran along the rooftops from one building to the next. A few times I stopped to listen for pursuit, but I seemed to have lost him.

Exhausted, I sat down on the edge of a rooftop and looked out over the city. I could see the main strip from where I sat and I watched the lights for a while, wondering who the strange man was. After a time I got up to leave but when I turned I ran into what felt like a stone wall. Immediately arms like steel bands went around me and held me captive.

"Would you like to meet the Prince now or after I have beaten you for your insolence?" a deep voice with a distinct Spanish accent said.

"What are you talking about?" I cried, struggling to free myself. "This is America, there are no princes here! Let me go!"

I tried to jerk out of his grasp but he was far too strong. I raised my head and looked him in the eye. The instant I did so I knew it was a mistake, but it was too late; I couldn't look away.

"Relax," he said, his voice a soft purr in the night. Almost against my will I felt my struggles cease. I tried again to look away but his dark gaze held my eyes. After a moment he asked, "What is your name?"

"Christina," I replied, feeling as if I were in a daze.

"Christina," he repeated softly. "What clan are you?"

"What clan?" I shook my head, confused. "I'm not Scottish. I think you have mistaken me for someone else. Please let me go."

He smiled at me, his straight white teeth gleaming in the light that shone up from the street. "I can see you are not, childe," he said. "Tell me where you are from. Tell me about yourself."

"I don't know," I whispered, suddenly afraid of displeasing this man who seemed so much more than a man. "I don't remember anything."

"Then how do you know your name?" he asked.

"The bracelet," I said, trying to raise my arm to show him. He allowed the movement, releasing me and taking a step back. He took my wrist and looked carefully at the bracelet.

"Where did you get this?"

"I don't know, I was wearing it when I woke up last night." I knew I should try to run from him but somehow he kept me there, almost mesmerized.

He looked into my eyes for several long minutes, as if searching for the truth. "Tell me," he said softly, and I felt absolutely compelled to do so.

I told him of waking in the alley and the hunger that had consumed me. I told him about watching the street and seeing him, about the food and the blood and the tears. I even told him of the woman in the alley and the fear of what I thought I might be.

"Childe, do you not know what you are?" the man asked gently.

"I don't know anything," I cried. "I don't know who I am or where I am. You ask me what I am? I'm a vampire!" I began to cry those awful, bloody tears.

"Well, Christina," he said soothingly, "My name is Antonio Miguel Santiago Moreno. We have much in common, you and I." He pulled out a lace edged handkerchief and began to wipe the blood from my face and hands.

"What?" I asked.

"We are both Vampires," he replied. When I gasped, he continued. "Yes, this is true. You require blood to survive, as do I. We are Kindred. Furthermore, we are of the same clan, the Tremere clan. It is the best kind of vampire to be." He took my arm and began to lead me toward a fire escape and down to the ground.

"The most important thing in the world for you and me is to be loyal to the House and Clan Tremere," he told me. "When you were embraced, you made a vow to that effect, even if you do not remember."

"Embraced?" I said as we climbed down the fire escape.

"When you became a vampire. I will teach you the terminology, and the traditions." He smiled at me then led me toward the mouth of the alley. "After loyalty to the Tremere comes the Masquerade. No mortal must be able to prove we exist, therefore no unnecessary killing."

"It was an accident," I whispered. Once I'd started drinking from the woman, I really didn't know how to stop myself from taking it all. The hunger had taken over.

"I know," he told me kindly.

When we reached the end of the alley, Antonio motioned to his limousine, which was parked in the street nearby. "You are alone. I am lonely," he sighed as he helped me inside. After settling

down across from me, he said, "With your permission, I would like to... adopt you. Begin your training. You have much to learn about being Kindred and even more to learn about being Tremere."

"What is Kindred?" I asked, looking around the lush interior of the limousine.

"Kindred is what we vampires call ourselves," he said.

I thought of what I believed I knew about vampires and already so much of it seemed false. I would need someone to instruct me, to guide me into the world of the night so I would never kill another human in ignorance.

"You are most kind, Antonio," I told him. "I am honored to accept you as my Sire."

Antonio looked at me sharply. "Childe, I know that you did not lie to me when you said you remember nothing before waking last eve. How did you know the term 'sire?'"

"I don't know," I said thoughtfully. "Maybe the same way I knew this was Vegas and that we are in a limousine. It seems I can remember many facts, but have no memories of how I learned them."

We were both silent for a while as the car moved through traffic. I wondered again who I had been and how I had come to this.

As we pulled to a stop in an underground parking garage beneath a large office building, another thought occurred to me. "Is there a way to find out who made me what I am? To find out who embraced me?" I asked him, carefully avoiding the term sire, as Antonio would be that for me now.

He thought for a moment, then looked away as he got out of the car. "I don't believe so," he told me as he offered a hand to help me out. "I will check into it, but I think you will have to content yourself with the memories you build from this day on. It is not uncommon for a childe to forget everything prior to her embrace. Granted," he added, "it does not often happen to one of our clan, but it does happen."

Antonio held out his arm to lead me to the door. "Welcome to my home, Christina. I believe we will have much to teach each other."

I took his arm and my life began.

THE NEONATE

But no one ever talked in the darkness

No voice ever added fuel to the fire

I Will Not Forget You - Sarah McLachlan

I was kneeling before a low table that held several candles, a wickedly sharp dagger, and a ceremonial chalice. Antonio stood on the other side of the table, watching me closely.

"I, Christina, hereby swear my everlasting loyalty to House and Clan Tremere and all its members. I am of their blood, and they are of mine. We share our lives, our goals and our achievements. I shall obey those the House sees fit to name my superiors, and treat my inferiors with all the respect and care they earn for themselves."

I picked up the chalice and held it between my hands. The contents were a dark crimson and the cup was cold against my skin. Looking into Antonio's eyes, I lifted the cup and felt the cool liquid burn a path down my throat.

"I will not deprive nor attempt to deprive any member of house and Clan Tremere of his magical power. To do so would be to act against the strength of our House. I will not slay nor attempt to slay any member of the House and Clan except in self-defense, or when a magus has been ruled outlaw by a properly constituted tribunal. If a magus has been ruled an outlaw, I shall bend all efforts to bring such magus to justice."

My nose seemed to tingle with the coppery scent of the chalice's contents as I drank again. My hunger raged and I struggled to take only a small sip.

"I will abide by all decisions of the tribunals, and respectfully honor the wishes of the Inner Council of Seven and the wishes of my superiors. The tribunals shall be bound by the spirit of the Code of Tremere, as supplemented by the Peripheral Code and interpreted by a properly constituted body of magi. I have the right to appeal a decision to a higher tribunal, if they should agree to hear my case."

As Antonio watched the candles cast flickering light over my face, I drank again.

"I will not endanger House and Clan Tremere through my actions. Nor will I interfere with the affairs of mundanes in any way that brings ruin upon my House and Clan. I will not, when dealing with devils, or others, in any way bring danger to the clan, nor will I disturb the fairies in any way that should cause them to take their vengeance on the House and Clan. I also swear to uphold the values and goals of the Camarilla, and I will maintain the Masquerade. Insofar as these goals may conflict with my goals, I will not pursue my own ends in any way that would endanger the Masquerade. The strength of the House and Clan Tremere depends on the strength of the Masquerade."

At the time of the embrace and oath taking, all Tremere drank the vitae of the Council of Seven. I would have done so the night I was embraced. I looked up at Antonio and drank more of the burning substance.

"I will not use magic to scry upon members of the House and Clan Tremere, nor shall I use it to peer into their affairs. It is expressly forbidden."

Because this night I was merely repeating my vows, Antonio had chosen not to have me drink the blood of the Seven, because it would have brought me closer to being blood bonded to the clan. I drank more of the fiery liquid, savoring the taste.

"I will train only apprentices who will swear to this code, and should any of them turn against the House and Clan, I shall be the first to strike them down and bring them to justice. No

apprentice of mine shall be called magus until he first swears to uphold the code. I shall treat my apprentices with the care and respect they earn."

I suppressed a shudder at those words as I knew now that each member of the House and Clan Tremere had made this same vow. I also knew Antonio to be a man, or rather, a Kindred of his word. I put the cup to my lips and drank again from the chalice.

"I concede to my elders the right to take my apprentice should it be found that my apprentice is valuable to an elder's work. All are members of the House and Clan and valuable first to these precepts. I shall abide by the right of my superiors to make such decisions."

I met Antonio's gaze and filled my mouth with his blood, letting it run slowly down my throat.

"I shall further the knowledge of the House and Clan and share with its members all that I find in my search for wisdom and power. No secrets are to be kept, or given, regarding the arts of magic, nor shall I keep secret the doings of others which might bring harm to the House and Clan."

My mouth was rich with the taste of blood, my voice strong and steady, my eyes on Antonio while I repeated my vow.

"I demand that, should I break this oath, I should be cast out of the House and Clan. If I am cast out, I ask my brothers to find and slay me that my life may not continue in degradation and infamy."

Again, I raised the cup to my lips.

"I recognize that the enemies of the House and Clan are my enemies, that the friends of the House and Clan are my allies. Let us work as one and grow hale and strong."

I gulped the coppery liquid quickly, suddenly eager to complete my vows.

"I hereby swear this oath on this day. Woe to they who try and tempt me to break my oath, and woe to me if I succumb to such temptation."

As the last portion of my sacred vow faded from the room, I lifted the cup one last time to my lips and drained it. Finally I held the cup upside down above my mouth and let the last few drops fall to my outstretched tongue. Licking the blood from my lips and teeth, I looked up at Antonio and grinned.

Years later when thinking of my time as a Neonate, I felt they had passed in a blur. I spent much of my time learning magic in the form of the Thaumaturgical rituals practiced by my clan. I seemed to pick up the rites naturally, almost as if I'd practiced magic before. Antonio told me once that it was possible that I'd had magical abilities prior to my embrace, and that was probably the reason I was chosen, but I wondered.

I wondered about who I had been and who had embraced me. I wondered why I had been chosen and then left alone to fend for myself. I wondered where my family was and if I even had a family. I wondered if I had a husband or children somewhere that missed me. I wondered.

Antonio and I grew close, as a true childe and sire should. He provided me with a monthly income from which I began to invest, usually following Antonio's advice. I studied long and hard to please him. At my insistence, Antonio taught me to tolerate food so that I could move in the mortal world more easily. After a time, he would allow me to accompany him on brief excursions into the city. Sometimes one or more of his numerous houseguests joined them.

Antonio taught me how to hunt without fear and how to feed without killing. He started my education in some of the worst bars and alleys of the city, gradually moving up to the nightclubs and casinos as my skill increased. Still, I often preferred to hunt in the shadows of biker bars and alleyways.

I liked to watch other Kindred. I made a game out of guessing the clan and generation of every vampire I saw. At first Antonio would point out my errors, but soon I was guessing correctly most of the time.

Members of the Tremere Clan fascinated me. They all seemed to exude pride and magic in equal quantities. Some of them were kind enough to share spells and rites with me. Others gave me insight into living the Tremere lifestyle. But I was always suspicious of any Tremere exactly one generation above myself, as any one of them might have been the one to embrace me. I spoke to Antonio several times about my fears, and he tried to reassure me. He believed my true sire had been destroyed before beginning my training, but I couldn't make myself believe that.

About a week into my training, I began to have dreams, nightmares really. I couldn't remember the contents of the dream when I awoke, but somehow I knew they were dreams about my life. Often Antonio was there to comfort me.

Estrea Moreno was a frequent visitor to Antonio's home. She was living as a Ventrue and very beautiful. Estrea lived in San Francisco, but she liked the thrill of gambling so she came often to Las Vegas. She usually won. Eventually, she and I became friends. As my training progressed, Antonio would allow me to venture out more often with Estrea while he remained at home.

Estrea also had no memory of any life before her embrace. She, too, had awakened one evening, lost, afraid, and hungry. A Kindred high in San Francisco's Ventrue Clan had adopted her, but at one time Antonio had taken her in. I believed my sire encouraged our friendship because of our shared background. It did help me to have someone nearby who had the same memories of waking to hunger and terror. I began to dwell less and less on my past and focus on building my future.

I discovered an intense love of books. I began to frequent several bookstores in Las Vegas, often special ordering out of print books. While I was interested in magical tomes, it was literature and fiction that really drew my attention. I read Shakespeare and Homer, Robert Heinlein and Stephen King. Soon I had books stacked all over my rooms in Antonio's house. I also discovered an affection for movies. I spent many evenings at the local theatres watching everything from *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* to *Hamlet*. I started a collection of movies on videocassettes, but there wasn't much room for them among my books. One night about a year into my studies Antonio presented me with a 35-mm camera. Soon the camera was with me nearly everywhere I went and I was taking pictures of everything.

There were times over those years that I would feel as if someone were there beside me, watching over me. On those occasions, I mourned for my mortal life, and despaired that I would never remember my past. I began to collect photographs and paintings of sunrises and sunsets. When Antonio questioned me about it, I tried to laugh it off, saying I was following a current fad. The truth was that I thought I should miss the sunlight. It bothered me that I didn't remember it and therefore *couldn't* miss it. As my time as a Childe grew to a close, Antonio helped me acquire a loft apartment on North Mojave Road, overlooking the Las Vegas Nature Park.

My apartment was a simple economy with a sleeping loft, but I loved every inch of it. I bought overstuffed furniture and a large, expensive entertainment system. I hired a carpenter to build shelves into the walls to hold my books and movies. I hung my photos and paintings of the sun above those shelves, all the way to the high ceiling. A folding screen, six feet tall and five panels long, ran along the rail of the loft. A similar, smaller screen separated the dining area from the kitchen. I bought many plants suitable for low light conditions and put them all over my apartment.

I also had the carpenter build secret compartments into several places around the apartment. A space under the stairs held my oldest, most treasured books. One of the bookcases in the sleeping loft opened into a tiny room, the walls of which I covered with photos of children. A

secret panel from that room led into the building's stairway, giving me a convenient entrance or exit from my apartment in times of trouble. Steel shutters were installed on all the windows in the apartment to protect me from the sun.

When I had been studying with Antonio for nearly five years, he decided it was time to release me. He set up an appointment for me to meet with the prince, Felicia, who was the leader of Kindred in Las Vegas. This was a very important meeting for me because the prince of any given city has the right to destroy any childe they do not feel deserves to be a Kindred. Antonio prepared me very carefully for the presentation. He was very proud when I did well and Felicia complimented Antonio on his choice of childer. That night I began my life as an independent member of the Tremere clan in Las Vegas.

INTRIGUE

Last night I felt the wind of change
Blow through me
Song and Dance Man - Warrant

Estrea visited Las Vegas about three times a month and usually Luke Thomas came with her. We often went to the casinos together, the Las Vegas strip was a popular feeding spot for Kindred, as well as a place to see and be seen.

The three of us were good friends, but at some point in the last year I had realized that Luke wanted something more from me. Since I couldn't remember having any close relationship with a man, I didn't know how to respond, or even if I wanted to.

Antonio had gone to Vienna on Tremere business with his new childe Brenda, his true childe, who was a former ghoul of his friend Michael Moorecock. He had placed his limousine at my disposal, which he usual did when he was away. I picked up the duo at Antonio's house and we went to a casino that Estrea preferred. It didn't take long for the three of us to go our separate ways in the crowd.

I played Roulette for a while, then turned to watch the people. I spotted a tall Kindred gentleman in an expensive suit playing blackjack and wandered over to watch. The Kindred had been losing, but after I stood by his side he started to win. After his third successful hand, he turned to look at me.

"You make a good luck charm," he said, smiling disarmingly.

"I think you make your own luck," I replied, and sat in an empty seat next to him. I motioned for the dealer to give me cards and we played several hands in silence, the gentleman wining, me losing. I soon gave up and surrendered my seat to another.

"Don't go," he said, "How can I win without you?" He smiled up at me and I grinned back.

"All right," I replied softly. "I'll watch you a while."

"Unless you prefer to find someplace quiet?" he suggested.

"I don't think so," I told him. Trust didn't come easily for me, I had a tendency to be suspicious of everyone and everything. "I don't even know you."

"Are you always so careful about those you spend quiet time with?" he asked.

"I try to be," I said. I looked around the room and spotted Estrea talking to an elderly mortal, while Luke was playing blackjack. "I pick my friends very carefully."

After a few minutes the Kindred asked if I was sure I didn't want to find some privacy with him. I could feel the pull of his presence, but I demurred.

Without warning he grabbed me by the neck and all but threw me down on the table. Before I could react he had an arm across me and I heard a gun go off. A moment later he released me and I straightened. I saw a blur that I thought was him brush past Luke on the way out the door.

I hurried to follow and caught up with Luke and Estrea on the sidewalk. Seeing blood on Luke's sleeve, I asked if he was okay and he nodded, flexing his arm. I looked around, but the Kindred was gone.

"What happened?" I asked them.

"I don't know," Estrea answered, looking thoughtfully at us. "We have a summons from the prince of San Francisco. All of us."

"Why?" Luke asked.

"I'm not sure, but we have to be there tomorrow night." She looked around, listening to the sirens coming our way. "Let's get out of here."

We went back to the chantry and talked for a while, trying to figure out what had happened. I decided to spend the night there so we could leave for the airport early the next evening. We flew to San Francisco where a limousine was waiting for us at the airport. We arrived at the prince's home and waited in his library for him.

When Julian Luna, the Ventrue prince of San Francisco, arrived he explained to us that there had been numerous disappearances of Kindred and mortals from the East Coast, specifically around New York. He asked that Estrea and Luke travel to New York that evening and that I wait a few days before following to allay any suspicions that we were working together. We all agreed, and while Estrea and Luke were driven to the airport, I was taken to a hotel downtown, where I readied myself for bed.

As I lay down, I wondered if I had ever stayed at that particular hotel before.

In my dream I was a little girl again, sitting on the steps of my home. I wore a frilly blue dress because blue was his favorite color. I was waiting for him, and when he came home we would go into the woods behind the house to play. I squirmed on the step, anxious for him to arrive, anticipating the fun we would have together. Suddenly I saw a figure walking down the street and I ran towards him, calling out.

He caught me in his arms and spun me around, a strong boy of perhaps twelve or thirteen. "Hey, 'Tina," he said, his green eyes laughing at me. "What's the occasion?"

"You know," I said, smoothing my dress as he put me down. "You said we could play today." I tugged his hand, pulling him toward the woods. "Let's go!"

"You might get your dress dirty," he said. "Don't you want to change before we go?"

"You'll make sure I don't get it dirty," I replied, smiling up at him. "And if you do let me get dirty, you'll fix it." I pulled at his hand again and —

I was torn from sleep by the sound of the door to my room bursting open. I sat up, holding the blanket to my chest to cover the thin nightgown I had donned before climbing into bed just before sunrise.

A tall man with shoulder length brown hair stepped into the circle of light cast from the lamp I'd left on. After a quick glance at his face I was sure he was Kindred.

Sounding like a hero from a popular movie, he said urgently, "Come with me if you want to live!" His voice captivated me, but still I nearly laughed at him until I saw the smoke rolling in through the open doorway.

The man turned and slammed the door shut, then pulled out a pistol in each hand. Using phosphorous rounds, which explode on impact, he literally blew a hole in the outside wall of the hotel. Holstering one of the guns, he turned and held a hand out to me.

Hesitating only a moment, I jumped up, grabbed my bag, and took his outstretched hand. Quickly he pulled me through the hole he had made and across the lawn to a car parked nearby.

I glanced back to see that nearly the entire building was in flames. If he had arrived a few minutes later, I would have been burned to a crisp. The man opened the driver's door and pushed me inside, then got behind the wheel and sped off into the night.

"Thank you," I said quietly, brushing my long dark hair out of my eyes and pulling down the hem of my nightgown. I reached into my bag for jeans and a sweater. When he didn't reply, I looked at him and asked, "Who are you?"

"A friend," he said. "I have been sent to keep you safe." He glanced over at me as I pulled on a pair of jeans, then looked back at the road. "My name is 'August Christopher.'"

His voice had a pleasing Southern accent, and I found myself inexplicably drawn to this handsome stranger. It was more his mannerisms that attracted me than his obvious good looks, but I found it hard to trust him. It seemed too easy to believe he just happened to be in the right place at the right time to save me. I didn't find out until much later that his real name was Jason Kline and he was really a ghoul.

"We must leave San Francisco tonight," he told me urgently. "I have made arrangements for us to fly to New York in a private jet."

"Wait," I protested, pulling the sweater down over my nightgown. "What's the rush? I am supposed to be helping the prince with an important investigation."

"Do you think it coincidence that the hotel you were sleeping in was on fire?" he replied, his voice grim. "You need to leave town or you will die."

"Why do you care?" I shot back, angered at his high-handedness.

"I have been instructed to keep you alive," he said, and would say no more on the subject.

In silence we drove to the airport where in short order we were alone on a Lear jet bound for New York. When we were at cruising altitude, he pulled a briefcase out and opened it. He rummaged around inside for a few minutes, then pulled out a pistol. "This is a Glock 17," he told me. "Have you ever fired a gun?"

"No," I said quietly, slightly intimidated by the weapon. Antonio had taught me many things, but not how to use a firearm.

Jason showed me how to load and clean the gun, and a few techniques for firing it. Then he gave me extra shells and told me to keep the gun on me at all times. He proceeded to show me some basic self-defense moves. He seemed very strong, and well versed in combat.

"Why are you helping me?" I asked near dawn as he was showing me where I would sleep for the day. He planned on landing in Cincinnati and arriving in New York shortly after sundown the next evening.

"I have been instructed to keep you alive," he repeated.

That sounded like a cop out to me. "By whom?"

"I am not at liberty to say," he told me, then turned and left the compartment to return to the cabin.

I didn't have any choice but to trust him for now, but I was far from satisfied by his answers. I washed my face and lay down on the couch. Within minutes I was asleep.

NEW YORK

I can't understand all the push and shove
And what the fuck's happened to the peace and love
I Got One For Ya - Kid Rock

When I awoke, we were already in the air. I went into the small bathroom and combed my hair. I also put on some make-up, telling myself it was not because of Jason. I changed my clothing and went up to the cockpit. As I approached the door, I heard someone speaking without any noticeable accent. I assumed it was on the radio when I entered the cockpit and saw Jason replacing the radio handset.

"We should be landing in a few minutes," he told me in that wonderful southern drawl.

"'August'," I said, "what is really going on here? Why would it be so important to keep me alive?"

He glanced over at me as he began his final landing approach. "My employer instructed me to keep you safe."

"Your employer? Who is your employer?" I queried.

"Someone concerned for your safety," was all he would say.

We were quiet as he landed the Leer. As we taxied to the gate, a long black limousine pulled up and a chauffeur in a black tuxedo stepped out and opened one of the rear doors. When I saw Estrea and Luke exit the car, I breathed a silent sigh of relief. "Do you know these people?" Jason asked as a tall Kindred in an expensive Armani suite got out and the driver closed the door.

"The female is Estrea, a friend of mine," I said softly. "The man in jeans is also a friend, Luke. I don't know the driver and I can't see the suit well enough to tell if I know him."

Jason pulled out his briefcase again. From its contents he handed me a radio receiver that fit inside of my ear, instructing me on how to use it. He also clipped a small pin on my jacket and another on his own. "These will allow us to hear each other at a distance of about two miles," he said. "If I see something I don't like, I will say the word 'darlin'.' If you hear me say that, get out of here as fast as you can."

I couldn't see what could possibly happen in this situation, but I agreed.

Jason walked down the ramp and to the waiting limousine while I stayed just inside the door, peeking out of a window. "Estrea, Luke," Jason said. "Who are these with you?"

"How do you know our names?" Luke demanded.

"I know what I need to," Jason replied sternly. "Now I need to know who these individuals are."

Estrea spoke up. "This is Michael Moorecock. The driver has been assigned to us by the prince."

I knew Michael; Antonio had adopted him just as he'd adopted Estrea and me, although Michael was really Ventrue.

Jason was silent a moment, I thought sizing up the Michael, but I really couldn't tell from this distance. The Ventrue didn't seem to be intimidated in any way, standing tall with his arms crossed.

"Do you trust them?" Jason said.

"Yes," Estrea replied.

After a moment, Jason turned toward the plane. "Christina," he said softly.

"Christina?" I heard Luke say as I stepped out onto the stairs. Apparently they had not been expecting me. "What is she doing here?" I walked quickly over to the limousine.

When I approached, Estrea said, "You were supposed to stay in San Francisco, what happened?"

"Fortunately I did not," I replied. "If I had I might be toast by now. Michael," I said to my adopted brother. He greeted me and bent over my hand, kissing it.

"What do you mean?" asked Luke intently.

"I pulled her out of a burning hotel," Jason stated as he gestured for the driver to open the door of the limousine. "Needless to say I thought she'd be safer in another town. Shall we go see the prince?" After he saw us all seated in the back with Michael and Luke facing the rear, Jason walked around to sit by the driver. Within minutes we were on our way.

Estrea leaned close and whispered, "Who is this guy you're with? Can we trust him?"

"I'm not sure," I said softly, looking up to see that Jason had turned to face me. He smiled at me and I returned his smile as I remembered the microphone on my jacket. "He won't tell me who instructed him to protect me. Somehow I can't quite bring myself to trust him." I watched as Jason's smile faded.

He seemed to notice something behind us and spoke to the driver, who began to drive faster. Michael leaned forward, watching our tail. Luke also seemed to see something, and Estrea and I turned to look.

"What is it," Estrea asked.

"We're being followed," Michael said.

The driver took several turns in an effort to lose the truck, but it continued to follow us. We turned down an alley and suddenly the shadows seemed to slide off the walls and obscure the street behind us. The truck burst through the darkness and kept coming.

We made a quick right down a busy street, then a left, and another left. As I watched the truck, a wall appeared behind us. I wondered who was throwing the illusions around. Jason? I didn't think so. Michael? It seemed unlikely as he was pulling out a very large handgun and checking the ammo. The driver? Maybe. As far as I knew only Ravnos or Assamite clan could pull such stunts. Neither clan was well regarded.

The truck burst through the illusion and the wall disappeared. We made several turns in quick procession, ending up in another alley. Michael pushed a button to open the sunroof, then stood, bracing himself on the roof. We heard three quick gunshots, and the truck behind us burst into flames, rolling over and landing on its side. Estrea and I looked at each other, knowing there could be no survivors in that inferno.

The driver turned onto a main street and continued on. Michael sat down and holstered his weapon, closing the sunroof as he did so.

"Good shooting," Luke said.

Michael shrugged as if it were nothing.

"Who were they?" I asked. "Could you tell?"

"I believe they were Brujah friends," he replied, "probably after you."

Estrea looked at me. "What have you done?"

"I haven't done anything!" I exclaimed.

"That you know of," she replied. "What about from before?"

"From before my embrace? Five years is a long time to wait."

"'Revenge is a dish best served cold'," Michael quoted. "Maybe someone has a great deal of patience."

"Who?" I demanded. "Do you know more than you are saying?"

He didn't answer me.

I raised my voice to ask, "'August', why are you really here? No bullshit this time."

"I told you why I was here," he replied. "I was told to come so I did."

At that moment the limousine pulled up in front of a large brownstone, presumably the Prince of New York's haven. The driver got out and opened the door for us. We walked up the steps and Michael rang the bell as the driver drove away in the limousine.

A young man opened the door. He looked at us carefully, then let us in, leading the way to a study off the main hall. Estrea called him James and requested that the prince join us.

THE HAND OF GOD

And waiting hopes cast silent spells
That speak in clouded clues
Tapioca Tundra - The Monkees

I took a look around the room while we waited. One wall was covered floor to ceiling with books. A desk near the back of the room held a computer. A couch and two chairs were arranged near one corner. Michael took one of the chairs with his back to the wall; Jason chose a corner of the couch. Estrea and Luke sat in the remaining seats. I walked over to the fireplace and studied a painting that hung above the mantle. It took me a few minutes to realize the modern painting depicted a hellish scene. Everyone remained silent while we waited.

When the prince walked in, everyone rose to his or her feet. I walked over to stand near Estrea.

"Good," he said, "You are all here." Estrea and I glanced at each other. Had the prince been expecting Jason and myself? "As you may have heard, we have been experiencing disappearances of both Kindred and kine here on the East Coast." He motioned for us to be seated. The others regained their seats, while I sat on the arm of Estrea's chair. "There seems to be no pattern to these disappearances, and they have happened in closely guarded areas, setting off no alarms."

"You have no leads?" Luke asked.

"Only one." The prince turned to the desk and turned the monitor to face us. A grainy photograph of a ruined room covered the screen. At the left edge of the picture was what seemed to be white flowing robe. "This was taken with a surveillance camera in the high security penthouse of one of my primogen. No one saw the intruders, and no alarms went off, but the primogen disappeared just the same."

"Is there any way to enhance this picture?" asked Jason.

"Of course," the prince replied. He placed the keyboard on a corner of the desk near him and pressed a few keys, greatly smoothing the lines of the picture.

The five of us got up and walked closer to the desk for a better view. The enhanced photo really revealed nothing different, except....

"Can you enlarge and enhance this area?" I asked, pointing to where an overturned television set lay on the carpet. When the prince did so, two figures leapt into focus on the screen. Both wore robes with hoods that covered their faces. On the left hand of the one to the right was a ring.

"Enhance the ring," Jason said, a grave look on his face. In a moment the ring and the hand it was on covered the screen. "The Hands of God," he whispered. I doubt I would have heard it if not for the receiver in my ear.

"What is it?" Estrea asked. "Do you recognize it?"

"Maybe," he replied thoughtfully. After a moment he added, "I used to belong to an organization that used such a symbol, long ago."

"Used to?" I said.

"Used to. As I said, it was a long time ago." He turned away and walked toward the door. "With your leave, your majesty, I need to check out a few things."

"Of course," the prince replied. "Do you need transportation?"

"A motorcycle would be handy if you have one," he said.

"Speak with James. He will show you where one is kept." The prince turned back toward the screen.

"Thank you," Jason said, then looked at me pointedly. "Stay with your friends. If you need me," he tapped his ear, "I'll know." He turned and left. I heard him talking to James in the hall, then the front door open and close. I felt oddly alone and vulnerable with him gone.

"Christina?" I turned to face Estrea. "Shall we go and feed? Perhaps we can find some information at one of the clubs in town."

I smiled. "Yes, lets. With your leave?" I said to the Prince.

"By all means," he said. "May I recommend Marco's on 12th Avenue? The cuisine tends to be excellent there."

"Thank you," Luke said. "We'll be back in a couple of hours."

"Fine," the prince replied as he walked out of the study.

"I believe I will do some checking on my own," Michael stated. "Perhaps there is more than one bike available." With that he stalked out.

A BIRTHMARK

I'm so scared that I'll never
Get put back together
Bent - Matchbox Twenty

Estrea, Luke and I got into the limousine and gave the driver our destination. There was little conversation on the way to Marco's, each of us were lost in our own thoughts.

As we pulled up to the curb, I saw Michael standing in the street. Then I blinked. Two Michaels?

The first Michael was dressed as we had seen my adopted brother last, in an Armani suit. The other wore blue jeans and a black shirt. They stood about five feet apart and seemed to be arguing fiercely. Then the suit pulled out a pistol and aimed it at the other Michael.

Estrea was out of the limousine before it even stopped, dashing toward the duo. Luke and I followed only slightly more slowly.

"Are you two insane?" Estrea demanded. "You risk the Masquerade!"

"He stole my face," spat the Michael in the suit angrily. The other Michael was silent, but his hand was at the small of his back.

"Stop this now," Estrea said firmly. "Let's take this back to the Prince's home. I can't believe you would be this stupid." The last was meant toward the Michael in the suit. She took hold of the one in jeans and pushed him into the limousine, pulling a pistol of her own out of its holster and pointing at him. Luke and I followed them in, settling beside Estrea. The imposter kept his eyes on me as I settled next to Estrea, and I heard the sound of a large motorcycle start and its engine rev. It pulled away and moved toward the prince's brownstone.

"Back to the prince's," Luke barked at the driver.

"Who are you?" Estrea asked sharply. "What clan?"

"I am David. I am here to offer my support in your protection." He was still staring straight at me, as if I would disappear if he looked away. I noticed he did not give his clan.

"Not another one," I groaned. "Let me guess, your employer instructed you to protect me at all costs."

"No," he said, confused. "You are chosen. You must be protected."

"Chosen?" I asked sarcastically. "Chosen for what? Sainthood? No thanks, Saints have to die."

"Don't you know you are chosen?" David asked, taken aback. "But – the mark is upon you! How could you not know?"

"What mark?" Luke demanded.

"The cross," David replied.

"I have no cross to mark me," I said, narrowing my eyes at David. What kind of trick was this?

"On your shoulder, the mark," he insisted, pointing toward my left shoulder. "On your back."

My hand crept toward my shoulder.

"Look and you will see. She must be protected at all costs!" he insisted.

"Luke," I said, pulling my collar down and away from my neck. "Can you check?"

Luke touched a spot on my shoulder and whistled softly. "Plain as day," he said wonderingly, tracing the cross with his fingertip.

"How could you not know?" David asked. "How could you not know you were chosen?"

"She has no memory prior to her embrace," Estrea said coldly. "Now, Assamite, tell us who you really are, who you work for, and what you want with Christina."

"She must be protected," he replied, but something in his eyes made me doubt him. He was lying.

"Shoot him," I told Estrea. "I already have one man spouting lies about protecting me. I don't need another." David's eyes grew large as I heard a motorcycle pull up near the side of the limousine. It was not the one that Michael had been driving.

"Take out your gun," I heard from the transmitter in my ear, "and shut your mouth. Or are you *trying* to meet final death?" I could hear the exasperation strong in Jason's voice.

"What's the matter," I asked as I pulled my Glock 17 from its holster, releasing the safety, "Don't you like being called a liar?" Of course David assumed I was talking to him and he quickly shook his head as I aimed my gun at his head.

Estrea glanced at me while keeping her gun trained on David. "Don't you think we should let the prince deal with this killer?"

"Tell the driver to stop the car now," Jason said in my ear. When I hesitated, he barked, "Do it now! You must get him out of the car *now*."

Over my shoulder I tapped on the window separating us from the driver. "Pull over." Why was I trusting Jason? For all I knew he and David were conspiring to kill us all when we stopped.

As the car slowed, David look trapped, like a wild animal held to long. His eyes darted around the compartment. "What are you doing?" he asked.

"Letting you out here," I replied, gesturing for Luke to open the door as the limousine rolled to a stop. As soon as the door opened, Jason was there, tearing David from the seat and onto the street.

"Who do you work for?" Jason demanded, shaking the imposter. "Only three people knew of that mark. Who told you? Who is paying your blood price?" Jason slammed a fist into David's face, knocking him against the side of the limousine. David savagely pushed Jason away from him and ran down the street, disappearing after a few strides, the shadows seeming to swallow him up. Jason picked himself off the pavement and dusted himself off.

I studied him intently, brushing off Estrea's hand on my arm as I moved closer. "I think it's time for you to tell me about your employer," I said between gritted teeth, "or its time for you to leave me alone."

"Christina," Estrea implored, "he's only trying to help you."

Luke said nothing, but his eyes watched us all.

"I'm in danger every time he's with me," I stated bluntly. "How do we know he isn't part of this conspiracy? Do we even know he's Kindred? By the way, 'August'," I purred, "haven't you lost something?"

"What?" he said, confused at my change of subject.

"Your accent?" I replied, then gave a good southern accent of my own. "Or didn't you think li'l ol' me wouldn't notice when you lost it?"

Jason cursed softly under his breath and pulled out a cell phone from an inside pocket of this jacket. He dialed a number quickly and waited a moment. "Hello," he drawled, accent in place, "It's 'August,' 'August Christopher.' I have a minor problem. No, no, she's still alive, however she is very stubborn." A pause. "Well, I was rather hoping you would speak with her, sir. She has said if she doesn't find out who my employer is, she will leave me behind. Yes, I know I could find her, but it would be much easier to look after her if I accompanied her rather than followed her." Jason looked at me for a moment, listening. "Of course." He handed me the phone.

I took it, avoiding his gaze, and held it to my ear. "Yes?"

"My dear Christina," a deep voice said gruffly. "Why must you be so stubborn?"

"Who is this?" I demanded.

"I am a friend of Antonio's, my dear," he replied. "He asked me to keep an eye on his interests while he was in Vienna. You have some very nasty people after you. I have sent... 'August' to help you through this difficulty."

"I don't know you, how do I know you are telling me the truth?"

"You have no way to know for sure, childe, but maybe you could asked Luke and Estrea about a man named Graves and an airplane."

I put my hand over the mouthpiece and looked at Estrea. "Graves? An airplane?" I asked softly.

"Graves?" Luke answered, then nodded. "He is on our side."

"I think we can trust him," Estrea added.

"Are you he?" I asked back into the phone.

"I am."

"You must understand the difficulties I have in believing you, or 'August'. He hasn't been very forthcoming with information, and has acted rather suspiciously." Jason frowned at me and I turned away. "I don't mean to seem ungrateful, it is just that there seems to be few I can trust."

"I understand, childe. 'August' can be very difficult at times." He chuckled softly. "However, he is one of my best agents, and you can trust him with your life, I assure you."

I thought a moment, hesitating. "I will defer judgement on this matter, no offense to you sir," I said, "I will stay with 'August' and put faith in his abilities, for now." I turned to stare at Jason meaningfully. "But be warned, if he betrays me, I will kill him."

"I understand," Graves replied and rang off.

I turned the phone off and handed it back to Jason. When I turned without a word to reenter the limousine, Jason caught my arm.

"I want you to go back to the prince's home now," he told me firmly, "Stay there and wait for me."

"We need to find information," I replied.

"The others can find it. I want you safe," he said firmly.

I wanted to trust him, I really did, but how could I? I pulled my arm away and got into the limousine. The others followed, leaving Jason on the street staring through the window at me.

As the car pulled away from the curb, I heard Jason's voice in my ear. "You said you would put your faith in me. That faith will keep you alive, I swear it."

"The prince's," I instructed the driver coldly, not responding to the chuckle I heard from the receiver.

JASONS

Something's wrong shut the lights
Heavy thoughts tonight
Enter Sandman - Metallica

As the prince was out when we returned, I decided to spend some time in the study while Luke and Estrea went looking for information. There was no sign of Jason or Michael.

I glanced over the shelves, looking for something of interest. Near the bottom of the case I noticed a small yet thick older volume entitled "The Inquisition in Europe." I pulled it out and began to leaf through it, realizing rather quickly that the pages at the back of the book didn't move. I flipped to the beginning of that section and saw a combination lock.

"What is this?" I wondered aloud. I tried a few number combinations, but it didn't open. I looked through the book once more and noticed that one of the pages was folded down. I read a paragraph that was circled on the Hands of God and the destruction of all vampires. "Lovely sentiment." I murmured. I noted the page number and turned again to the back of the book. I dialed in the page number and heard a small click from within.

I opened the compartment to find a ring and a letter inside. The ring was exactly like the one we had seen in the photograph. I examined it closer; inside was written *Made in Japan*. I opened the letter and saw that the letterhead was from The Society of Leopold.

TO ALL OF THE HANDS;

ON FRIDAY NEXT AT SUNSET WE WILL END THE
WORLD OF THE EVIL THAT CAIN HAS GIVEN UNTO
US. WITH GOD ON OUR SIDE WE CAN'T FAIL. JOIN
ME BROTHERS TONIGHT AT THE FIRST CHURCH IN
CHRIST AND WE WILL BE TOGETHER AS ONE.

FATHER STRONG

"Father Strong?" I said slowly. Suddenly I saw a vision of my hand writing a letter on peach stationery. *I look forward to coming home for Christmas, Papa, I saw myself write. Love Always, Christina Strong.* The bracelet on my wrist seemed to warm against my skin.

A knock on the door broke my reverie. I quickly replaced the items in the book and locked the compartment, then put the book in the inner pocket of my jacket.

I walked out into the hallway, but no one was in sight. I went to the door and looked through the peephole to see Jason standing on the sidewalk. Breathing a sigh of relief, I opened the door and stepped back to let him in.

"I'm glad you're here," I told him as I turned and walked toward the study. "I found something I need to show you."

"I'd like you to do something for me first," he said quietly.

I turned. "What?"

"Die!" he growled. I watched in amazement as the person I'd agreed to trust with my life raised a hand with razor sharp claws and drew back to strike. Time seemed to slow to a stand still.

I went for my gun as I belatedly realized this 'August' was not wearing the same clothing that Jason had been wearing the last time I saw him. Then there was no more time to think as he leapt toward me and I fired at him but my shot went wild, exploding against the doorframe.

Damn.

I felt his claws sink into my chest as I spun to avoid the worst of the blow. I collapsed to the floor, stunned and bleeding. Dimly I watched my blood pool on the floor around me. My vision began to blur as the creature standing above me laughed.

Using every ounce of my will, I brought the gun up and fired. Again I missed, the shot blowing a large hole through the closed door of the brownstone.

"And so I die," I whispered, as I watched the Kindred who looked so much like Jason raise his hand to strike again.

Suddenly what was left of the door burst open. Through blood tears I saw 'August,' my Jason, in the doorway, with large claws on each finger of both hands. He dove across the room and buried his hands in the imposter's chest. The beast fell to the floor in agony, dying.

At once Jason was at my side, shoving the Assamite's wrist to my mouth. When he saw that I was too weak to bite into the skin, he pulled out a knife and slit the vein, then returned the wrist to my mouth. I drank deeply, feeling my strength, in part, return.

As I sucked the cool vitae, I watched Jason slit the beast's other wrist and drink for a moment. Then he placed his hands over my wounds and whispered in Latin while I continued to drink.

Suddenly I felt much stronger although my wounds hadn't healed fully. I shuddered. Was it the Assamite's blood or Jason's healing that had done the trick? I wasn't sure. I pushed the wrist away and sat up. Because Kindred claws had inflicted my injury, it would take many nights to heal, but the damage was fully half what it had been just minutes ago.

Quickly Jason peeled the blood stained clothing from my upper body. I reached for the jacket and pulled out the book, clutching it as Jason threw everything else into the fireplace. He placed his jacket around me, then cut the area of bloodstained carpet and placed it along with Kindred's body into the fire. We watched as the flames consumed them and a foul odor filled the air.

Jason studied me closely. "Are you okay?"

"I think so," I replied though I really wasn't sure. My head was spinning and I felt both very weak and very strong. "I'm hungry," I said. I had not drunk nearly enough from the assassin to replace what I had lost.

I could feel Jason's gaze on me as I watched the fire burn and his wrist appeared before me. "Just don't take too much," he cautioned.

With the odor of blood surrounding me I gently took his hand and turned it over to reveal his wrist. I glanced at Jason's face and he nodded at me. Slowly I lowered my head and sank my fangs into his flesh. I drank only what I had to; I needed Jason to be sharp and strong. His blood tasted strange, almost human. At the time I had thought Jason was Kindred, and that he must have fed heavily before returning to the brownstone.

Carefully I withdrew my teeth from the wound, then licked it closed. I lowered my hands into my lap, still holding his gently. I studied our clasped hands for a moment. "Thank you," I said, looking up at him.

He returned my gaze, then helped me to my feet. "I know you have had a hard time trusting me, Christina," he said, "but I really am here to protect you."

I closed my eyes briefly to shut out his probing stare. "I'm sorry," I whispered. "I have a hard time trusting anyone, it's not just you." Jason had more than proven his loyalty to me; I knew he would keep me safe. "I will try to trust you."

He squeezed my hand gently, then helped me to my feet. We walked out the back of the house and into the garage. Jason chose a dark sedan and quickly found the keys.

We left the prince's house and drove until we reached a department store that was open all night. He pulled into a parking space near the back of the lot. "I'm going in to get you a change of clothes," he said. I became very conscious of my nakedness under his jacket. "Any preferences?"

"No," I replied.

I could feel his eyes on me for a long moment as if debating whether to leave me there alone. His glance took in my bloodstained clothing and the fact that my upper body was naked beneath his jacket. He got out of the car and I watched him walk across the parking lot and into the store.

I watched cars pulling in and out and people walking around the parking lot. Then I saw a teenage boy walking alone near the car. I called him over and asked him where the hot spots in town were. When he met my eyes, I said, "*Relent*."

His eyes went blank as I pulled him partially into the car through the open window. I fed deeply, leaving him woozy and licking the wound closed.

"Go home," I said. "*Forget* you even saw me."

While he stumbled away, I looked over to see Jason leaving the store. He glanced at the teenager, then back at me and smiled. I rolled up the car window and leaned back in the seat as Jason climbed into the car.

He handed me one bag and placed two others into the back seat. I pulled out a pair of slacks, a blouse and a jacket. At the bottom of the bag were underwear and shoes.

"Thank you," I said, wishing we were further away from the lights of the lot so I could change right there. Suddenly the car was engulfed in shadows. Jason glanced sharply around, then grinned at me.

"You use that Assamite blood well, Christina," he said. "Hurry and change before you've spent it all."

I did so, wincing at the stiffness of my shoulder and chest. I knew I would not be able to wear the lacy bra Jason had picked up unless I was healed more. I closed my eyes and concentrated on healing myself as Antonio had taught me. Afterward, I felt better. Not fully healed, my insides still ached and pulled when I moved, but at least I could get dressed.

Jason took my discarded clothing and walked to a nearby dumpster. While he was gone, the shadows dissipated, leaving the car fairly well lit. When he returned, he took a handkerchief from his pocket and began to wipe the blood from my face.

"Feel better now?" he asked.

"Much," I replied. "What's next?"

"Now we have to get you out of New York," he mused. "Let's go to the airport."

He started the car and we drove away. At the airport, Jason left me in the long term parking garage while he took one of the other bags he'd gotten inside with him. When he returned nearly half an hour later, I almost didn't recognize him. He had changed his clothing and now had long dark hair. He looked very different from the 'August' I knew. He opened the door to the car and helped me out.

"Milady," he said with a distinct Spanish accent, "I am 'Martín DePorres,' at your service." He bent over my hand and kissed the palm.

I grinned.

"'August' had to depart suddenly and he asked me to take over your care. Would you come with me?"

"I would be delighted," I said, and I was.

Jason led me to the rental area and a cargo van parked near the entrance. He opened the passenger door for me then walked around to the driver's side. He took the highways headed west, watching the mirrors for anyone following us. When we were nearly to Allentown, Pennsylvania, he pulled into a rest area. He climbed into the back of the van and opened the remaining bags.

As I watched, Jason took out a can of black spray paint and covered the inside of the back windows. Then he taped black plastic over the doors to ensure no light would get through. He did the same for the side doors.

"Get into the back," he told me, handing me a package containing an air mattress. "Do you think you can inflate that?"

"If I can remember how to breathe," I said, smiling broadly at him.

"It's easy," he drawled, his eyes dark and shining, "Just put your lips together and blow." We grinned at each other.

While I blew into the mattress, Jason taped the plastic up between the front seats and the cargo area. I jumped a little when a long knife punctured the plastic and ran a slit down to the floor. He then taped a second layer of plastic beside the first, slitting it up the opposite end.

After I had the mattress blown up, I laid down on top of it. I could feel it was nearing dawn by the way it pulled at my consciousness. I wondered why Jason didn't seem to be affected.

"'August'," I whispered, my eyes closing of their own volition.

"I'm here," he replied, taking my hand.

"I owe you a life boon," I said.

"Live," he whispered. "That will be my repayment."

THE PAST AWAKENS

When everything feels like the movies
And you bleed just to know you're alive
Iris - Goo Goo Dolls

When I awoke a few minutes after sunset, the van was already in motion.

"Martin," I called.

"Up here." He reached back and parted the plastic. "Come on up."

I crawled to the front of the van and into the passenger's seat. "Where are we?"

"Nearly to Cleveland," he answered.

"Ohio? How did we get so far?"

"I have my ways," he said. I wondered if he had pressed someone into driving for us while we slept. I found out much later that he hadn't needed to.

I stretched and felt my muscles twinge and pull. In order to be effective, I would have to perform the healing ritual again. It took blood to heal, so I mentally I checked my blood levels. I was down a bit from my injuries the night before, but I had enough to heal. I concentrated on healing once more, then stretched again. *Much better*, I thought. As the ritual to heal this type of wound could only be performed once a night, I believe that in two more nights and I would be back to my old self, as long as I could keep my blood levels up.

"Can we stop for a bit?" I asked. "A rest area maybe? Or a biker bar?" I preferred not to feed on the innocent and it was hard to find an innocent person in the places I liked to hunt.

"I'm sorry, Christina," he said. "We have to make the airport in Cleveland by ten o'clock, we have a flight scheduled. Can you wait?"

"Yeah, I guess." I wasn't starving yet, by any means. "Where are we going?"

"San Francisco." After a moment, he picked up the book I had taken from the prince of New York's house. "Where did you get this?"

"I took it from the prince's study just before the Assamite came." I shuddered lightly, remembering the surprise and pain of the attack.

Jason flipped the book open to the combination lock. "Can you open this?"

I took the book and showed him the folded page, then used the page number to open the lock. I handed him the ring and asked, "What do you know about the Society of Leopold?"

Jason looked stunned. "The Society? Why?"

I opened the note and handed it to him. He read it quickly in the dim map light of the van. "You found this letter in this book? Inside the prince's study?"

"Yes."

He reread the note thoughtfully. "Friday next. That could be tomorrow." It was Thursday night.

"I guess," I said. "What is the Society of Leopold?"

"Hunters," he replied gravely.

I became afraid. Kindred society survived by keeping below human notice, but there were mortals who knew about us and wanted nothing more than to see us all destroyed. I'd never come up against any of them, but Antonio had taught me how to keep my feedings below their notice.

Suddenly I again saw my hand writing a letter and signing it Christina Strong. I blinked the vision away. "Who is Roger Strong?"

Jason looked at me sharply, suspicion on his face. "Don't you know?"

"If I knew, I wouldn't ask," I replied coolly. "It's on the fringes of my mind, but I can't quite reach it." I put a hand to my temple, trying to rub the sudden pain I felt away. "But I think you know who he is, so tell me." I looked over at him and added softly, "Please."

"Christina," he began hesitantly, "do you remember anything about your life before you woke in that alley? Anything at all?"

"Not really," I told him. "Only flashes now and then, and nothing that seems real or that I can identify. Sometimes faces that I can't put names to. Why?"

"There's no way to say this except to say it," he said bluntly. "Roger Strong is the head of the Inquisition chapter in San Francisco."

"The Inquisition?" I gaped. "The Society of Leopold is the Inquisition?" I had heard rumors that the Inquisition was still around, underground of course, but I had discounted them as tales used to frighten newly turned Kindred.

"Yes," Jason replied. "Alive and going strong in America, if you pardon the pun. Strong went crazy about five years ago when his daughter went missing from Berkley University. He became convinced, for several reasons, that Kindred murdered her. He began hunting and killing them indiscriminately, often travelling the country in his pursuit."

It had been five years ago that Antonio found me in Vegas, was that a coincidence? I doubted it given the name I'd seen myself sign. "She isn't dead, is she?"

"No."

I leaned back against the headrest and covered my eyes. "She's me."

"Yes."

"My father is a member of the Inquisition, sworn to destroy Kindred because I was killed by one." I laughed ruefully. "Except I wasn't killed by one, I am one."

"That pretty much sums it up," Jason said. An exit came up to our right and he took it, following the flow of traffic to the airport. "Graves is hoping you can convince Strong to stop the killing. Your father is too well known in the Society for his death, no matter what the cause, to be considered accidental, even if it really was. Roger Strong is untouchable, but still he must be stopped." Jason looked over at me searchingly. "Christina, we need you to stop him."

I looked out the window, watching an airplane come in for landing, its lights flashing against the dark sky. "I don't even remember him, how can I stop him?" I asked softly. "He is nothing but a name to me. You know I have no memories of my life. How do I know he didn't force a Tremere captive to embrace me so he would have an excuse to go on this killing spree? How do I know he even cares about what happens to me?" I looked back at Jason. "How do I even know that I really am Christina Strong?"

He had no answers for me.

The bracelet on my wrist felt heavy and warm, and I could feel danger all around me. I knew I had reason to be afraid of my father, but I didn't understand why. Would he kill me, his own daughter? Somehow I knew he wouldn't hesitate to do so.

"Martin," I said when he pulled up in front of a small hanger on the edge of the airport. "You told David that only three people knew of the mark on my shoulder. Who are they?"

"Graves, myself," he paused. "And Antonio."

"Why wouldn't Antonio have mentioned the mark to me?"

"I'd like to know the answer to that myself," he replied, reaching into the back of the van for our things.

"You suspect him?"

"There have been rumors," he said as we got out and walked toward the hanger. "I'm not sure who to trust. Graves wants us to meet your friends in Vegas tonight, at the chantry."

I shot him an angry glance. "You do suspect him."

"Do you know where Antonio is?" he asked.

"The last I knew he was supposed to be in Vienna with his new child." I said. That was where he had told me he was going, and I had no reason to think he was lying.

"Really?" Jason led me toward a small aircraft. "He's been seen recently in San Francisco."

"How recently?"

"Last night." Jason pulled down the stair and held my hand as I climbed into the plane. He stowed our stuff in the rear and got into the pilot's seat. After talking for a moment on the radio, he started the engines. Within minutes we were taxiing down the runway.

"You know, you were wrong," I murmured as the plane gained speed to take off.

"About what?"

"The mark. My father would have known about it." I told him. "Maybe you shouldn't condemn Antonio just yet."

Still, if Antonio had been seen last night, then he wasn't in Vienna. I couldn't bring myself to suspect my sire, but something funny was going on. I spun the bracelet on my wrist and thought about how everything seemed to be shifting around me.

I fingered the bracelet for a moment longer, then looked out onto the runway. "Since you and Graves seem to have been investigating me, tell me what you know."

"Are you sure?" Jason asked. "Me telling you won't be like you remembering it. It may not seem real."

"I'm sure," I said, and I was. "Just tell me what you know."

"Well, we didn't have time to check extensively into your background." He handed me a picture from his coat pocket that looked like a senior portrait of me. I didn't look that much different, but then I hadn't aged at all in the last five years. "You were an exceptional student at Berkeley where you studied Photojournalism. Your father lived in Sacramento but you didn't visit him often. One night in the spring of your senior year, you drove off campus and disappeared. You surfaced about three months later in Las Vegas, where Antonio found you. You know everything from there."

"Do you know who embraced me?" I demanded.

"No," he said gravely. "It happened during the three month period you were missing."

Somehow, I believed him. "What do you know of my mortal life?"

"Very little," he replied. "You lived in Helena, Montana before going to college, but before I had a chance to research any further, I had to meet you in San Francisco."

I was silent for a while, trying to absorb everything that had happened in the last few days. Had my father been involved in my embrace? Or had he really been so devastated by my death that he sought revenge for it over and over? Was Antonio somehow involved in this mess? Why wasn't he in Vienna?

Hunger nipped at my attention. I pushed it away, as I knew there was no way for me to feed. I was unwilling to ask Jason for any of his as I thought he would be also running low.

Photojournalism, I thought. Somehow that felt right. At Berkeley. I tried to remember something, anything, but I kept coming up blank. I had to face the fact that I may never have memories of my mortal life. I closed my eyes and dozed to the drone of the engines.

ANTONIO

I try to fool myself in believing
Things are going to get better
Effusion - Creed

I awakened as the plane landed in Las Vegas. We got into a limousine that had pulled onto the runway to meet us. It took us to the Tremere Chantry where Estrea, Luke and Michael were waiting in the parking garage.

Estrea eyed Jason warily. "Estrea," I said, "this is 'Martín DePorres.'" I introduced him to everyone, feeling slightly foolish. Michael shook Jason's hand with a knowing look.

"Shall we go in?" Michael said, gesturing toward the door. The chantry butler nodded to Michael, Estrea and me when he let us in. None of us were strangers to the Chantry.

The butler showed us into a meeting room and Antonio came in soon after. Brenda, his new child, followed him in.

"Christina, Estrea," Antonio murmured, "what a surprise." He leaned close to me to give me a kiss on my cheek, which I returned. He did the same for Estrea before turning to Michael.

"Old man," Michael said, looking pointedly at Brenda, who flinched.

Antonio followed his gaze. "Surely you knew."

"I was not happy to hear the news," Michael replied.

Before her embrace, Brenda had been Michael's ghoul. I had heard that she had asked him to embrace her and that he had refused. He obviously wasn't pleased to see that Antonio had gone against his wishes.

"Michael," Brenda whispered, her voice catching, "you knew this was what I wanted." Blood tears filled her eyes and she did her best to blink them back.

"Sir," Jason said to Antonio, breaking the tension, "we have a problem."

"And you are...?" Antonio asked almost contemptuously.

"'Martín DePorres,' at your service," he replied with a small bow.

"And the problem?" Antonio said.

"It involves your activities over the last two weeks," Jason stated bluntly.

"My activities?" Antonio looked confused and turned to Michael. "What is this all about?"

"Just answer the question," Michael replied curtly. "This is very important."

"I've been in Vienna the last month," he said, anger apparent in the thickness of his accent. "We returned just this evening." Antonio looked to Brenda for confirmation.

"Were you with him the entire time?" Michael demanded. "Every night?"

"Yes," Brenda replied. "We were doing intensive training with the Vienna Chantry. He couldn't have left Vienna without my knowledge."

"Well," Michael said, turning to pour himself a brandy from a decanter on a nearby tray, "that rules you out, old man. I must say I'm relieved."

"Rules me out of what?" Antonio barked.

"Can you trust her?" Estrea asked of Michael. "Would she lie for him?"

Michael looked at Brenda almost gently. "She would never lie to me," he said.

I watched the way his eyes lingered on her face and knew that he loved her. I wondered why she had been so driven to become Kindred that she had risked his wrath.

"Sounds like our faces aren't the only ones that have been stolen recently," Jason said to Michael.

"Will one of you please tell me what is going on?" Antonio demanded harshly.

"You've been seen in San Francisco recently," Michael told him as he sipped his drink. "As recently as last night."

"What?"

"There is a conspiracy about," Estrea said, "to discredit you and lead Christina to final death."

"And exterminate our kind," Luke added. "There have been numerous disappearances of Kindred from the East Coast."

"I understand there are factions who want to destroy all Kindred, and I do have enemies," Antonio said thoughtfully, "but who would want Christina dead?" He looked to me as if I had the answers.

"We were hoping you would know," Jason said.

Antonio looked surprised. "How would I know?"

"Any idea who her sire is?" Luke asked.

"Luke," I said, putting my hand on his arm. "Antonio is my sire."

"I know how you feel about him," Luke told me, "but he didn't embrace you."

"Do you know who actually embraced her?" Jason asked Antonio softly.

"I have no idea," Antonio replied. I wanted so much to believe him.

"Then we have a problem," said Michael. "We have no clue as to what is going on."

"I think we have more than a few ideas," Jason said. "First, a group of people, presumably Kine, calling themselves 'The Hands of God' have been killing Kindred. We have been able to trace 'The Hands' to The Society of Leopold." He pulled out the letter I had found and handed it to Michael. "Also, I have been able to ascertain that Roger Strong is in fact Christina's mortal father."

"What?" exclaimed Michael and Antonio simultaneously. Luke and Estrea simply looked at Jason, while Brenda had eyes only for Michael.

"How did you come by this information?" demanded Antonio, taking the letter from Michael.

"Graves and I came across it only a few days ago," Jason replied.

"And Graves did not share this information with me?"

"Sir, you must understand that we had no idea whose side you were on," Jason explained patiently. "How did we know you didn't already have that information? Or that you weren't a part of this scheme? After all," he added, "you have been seen in San Francisco in the last few weeks."

Antonio looked thoughtfully into the fireplace for several minutes. Then he turned to me. "Childe," he said, holding a hand out to me, which I took. "You apparently have powerful enemies, put it's possible this Strong may prove to be an ally." He looked deep into my eyes, searching. "Do you remember anything of this man?"

"I have had flashes of memories but nothing concrete," I told him, shaking my head ruefully. "I probably wouldn't know Roger Strong if I bit him."

Antonio paused a moment as if to gauge my sincerity. "Well then, we shall see." He turned to the others. "We have a party to attend in San Francisco. Let's catch a plane tonight and be there a bit early to test the waters."

We followed Antonio out as he called to the limousine. Jason again climbed into the front with the driver while the rest of us got into the back. There was little conversation on the way to the airport. I did notice Michael and Brenda looking at each other when they thought the other wasn't

looking. Antonio brooded silently. Occasionally I would see Jason glance back at me, as if to make sure I was all right. He made me feel like I was safe.

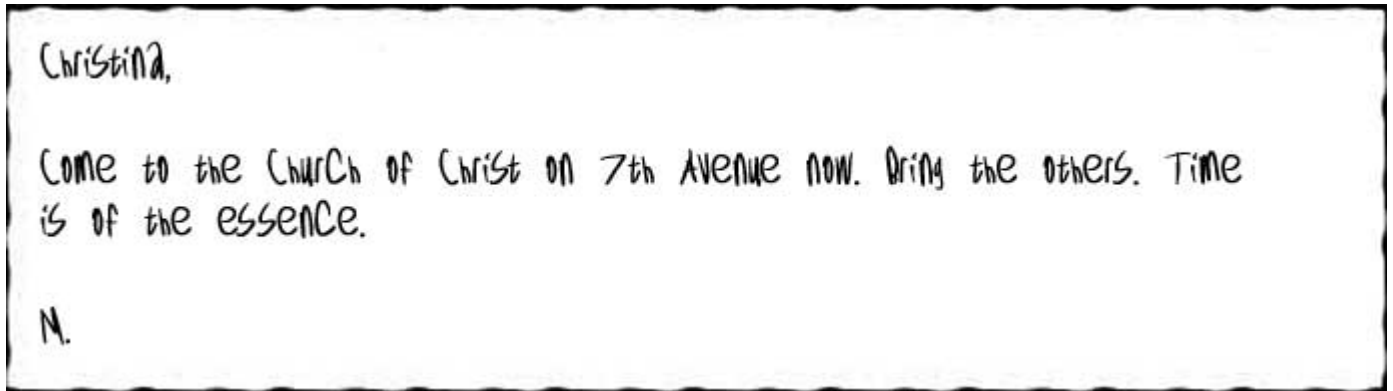
We arrived at the airport and got aboard Michael's private jet. We were in San Francisco in what seemed like no time. Michael arranged transportation for us all to a house on the West Side of town. Jason excused himself when we arrived, saying he had some contacts to check. He warned me to stay with Antonio and Michael. I cautioned him that it was nearing dawn, but he told me he'd keep himself protected.

Michael and Antonio shut themselves up in the den to make telephone calls while Luke and Estrea sat with me until dawn in the bedroom Michael had had prepared for Estrea and me. I fell asleep with the dawn worrying about Jason.

THE CHURCH

I sank into Eden with you
Alone in the church by and by
I Alone - Live

I awoke with the setting of the sun to find a note on my pillow wrapped around a single red rose.



I looked around to see Estrea waking more slowly. I got up quickly, handed her the note, and grabbed my gun. I ran through the house rousing everyone else, agonizing over the time that it took for everyone to wake and arm themselves.

Within minutes, we were underway. When we arrived at the church, there were half a dozen cars parked in the lot, and more pulling in behind us. We all got out and walked toward the building. About half way up the walk everyone else stopped short.

I turned to face them. "We must hurry," I said urgently, "Come on!"

I watched as they each tried to follow and seemed to run into an invisible wall. I spun at the sound of a gunshot, and knew I couldn't wait for them, somehow I knew Jason was in danger. I ran up the steps and into the church.

A second gunshot sounded from the basement, and I drew my Glock from the small of my back as I spotted stairs going down near the front of the chapel. When I reached the bottom of the steps, I saw Jason fighting with a Kindred male. They were on the ground and it looked like Jason was losing. As I rushed over, I could see that Jason had a large gash in his thigh that was bleeding badly.

I raised my gun, pressed it against the Kindred's temple, and vowed not to miss. As soon as I fired, the Kindred's head exploded and Jason rolled the body off of him.

Without thinking, I bit at my wrist and placed the wound against Jason's lips. He drank for a moment then released my arm and sat up. I felt the pull of his weight on my wounded shoulder as I picked him up and carried him to the top of the stairs, away from the hunters I had suddenly noticed were standing all around us.

As I laid him down, I took a good look at the wound in his thigh. It was then that I knew the truth about Jason. It explained so much to me: why he never rode in the back of the limousine with the rest of us, the strange taste of his blood, and Antonio's contempt.

"Human?" I whispered, stunned.

Jason touched my hand and I helped him to his feet. One of the men from the basement of the church had followed us and now he took a step closer. I pointed my gun at him and he stopped short.

"Don't," I warned, my voice cold. Suddenly the gun wavered in my grip and I took a step back. I knew this man! I didn't know exactly who he was, but I was absolutely certain that I knew him.

"Christina," he whispered. The man looked shaken and pale, almost as if he had seen a ghost. He was of average height, and his hair was almost completely gray. His green eyes covered every inch of me as if I were food and he a starving man. He wore the garments of a priest.

Jason steadied on his feet at my side, his wound suddenly healed. He moved between the man and me so that I had to take a step to one side in order to keep my gun trained on the familiar stranger.

"Who are you?" I asked him.

"Christina, love," the man replied softly, tears in his eyes. "Don't you know me?"

"He is your father," Jason told me gently.

"No!" I cried. "Papa would not do murder like this."

"Yes," Jason repeated firmly, "This is your father, Roger Strong."

I put my left hand on my forehead to fight the stream of memories flooding my mind; a birthday party, looking through the eyes of the small child I once was and blowing out candles, then gazing up at a younger version of this man who smiled down at me. Sitting on his lap and watching television with him late at night. Other images of other days, but still no name came to my mind. Then I saw myself sitting at a desk, addressing an envelope that lay before me. I saw my own hand write *Father Roger Strong*.

When I looked at Roger again, Jason slowly raised his hand to take the gun from me. On his finger, I saw a ring with a gold cross, a ring that spoke to me of membership in the Society of Leopold, the modern incarnation of the Inquisition. I took another step back and leveled the gun at Jason.

"You are one of them," I accused, my voice a low growl.

"No," he said, his brown eyes pleading for my understanding. "I am here to protect you."

"Then why the ring?" I demanded.

His met my scornful gaze without wavering, and his voice was low and careful as he said, "Christina, you know I came here to save you. I don't belong with these people."

"But you told me you used to!" I exclaimed. "How do I know you didn't rejoin them?"

"It was a long time ago, Christina," he replied. "I have changed much in that time. You know I am here to help you."

I heard a noise from behind me, but kept my eyes on Jason. Deep down I knew that whoever was behind me wasn't a threat because Jason was watching my back. Realizing how much I trusted Jason to protect me brought my chaotic thoughts up short and I slowly lowered the gun to my side.

Michael walked up from behind me and Martín motioned him toward the basement. I heard a quick barrage of gunfire and screaming from outside.

I looked again at my father. The emotions I felt were too overwhelming for me, and I holstered my gun and turned to walk out of the church. I paused at the top of the steps where I could see the gun battle going on between my friends and the hunters that had arrived after us. Jason and my father walked up to stand on either side of me.

"Call and end to it," Jason said to us.

Roger looked first at Jason, then me, then to the hunters. "Brothers and sisters," he cried, raising his arms. "We must cease this folly! We were misled! Put down your weapons!"

I too looked at Jason then at the others, saying, "It is over! Let us find peace here tonight!"

Kindred and kine stopped shooting and looked up at us. I started walking down the steps toward where Estrea and Luke stood. These were my friends, and the only beings I truly trusted other than Antonio, and now Jason.

When I reached the bottom of the steps, the world began to spin around me, and Luke grabbed my arm to catch me before I fell. He eased me down on the steps and sat next to me, putting an arm around my shoulders for support.

I could smell the blood spilled on the grounds of the church and the hunger bloomed strong within me. I hadn't felt it this keenly since the night I had found myself lost and alone in Las Vegas.

I turned my head into Luke's shoulder and tears came to my eyes. I could smell the blood in the mortals all around me, especially that of Jason and Roger, who were very close.

Luke offered his wrist to me and gratefully I took it, biting gently into his flesh. I heard Estrea speaking to Jason as I drank to ease the urgency of my hunger, then licked the wound shut.

I felt a hand at my shoulder and looked up to see Estrea crouched before me, her wrist extended. I took her arm and as I sucked the blood from her wrist, I could feel my father's eyes upon me. I took enough to feel in control of myself again, then licked at her wound to close it.

"Thank you," I told her, forcing a smile.

Estrea must have seen the horror in Papa's face because she stood and said to him, "Sir, she is a vampire. It is her nature now to drink blood to survive, just as it is in your nature to eat the meat of animals that have died for your food."

She smiled, gently touching Roger's arm. "For all that she does not remember you, she is still your daughter. Speak to her, help her regain her memories of her life. I'm sure you still have much in common."

"Thank you, my child," Roger said to Estrea.

Jason crouched at my side and brushed his fingers against my cheek. Luke stiffened at my side as I looked up and smiled at Jason then took his hand. He helped me stand and put an arm around my waist to steady me when I would have fallen. Jason led me to where my father stood waiting for me.

I felt Papa's eyes on me but a long moment passed before I could bring myself to meet his gaze.

"Christina Joanne," he said softly, "do you truly not remember me?" He reached out to put a hand on my shoulder, but I pulled away from his touch.

I searched his face. Christina Joanne Strong. Somehow that felt right, and in the lines of the hunter's face, I saw my father. Dimly I remembered that same face from my past. *Things are not as they seem*, a voice in my head warned, but I did remember this man.

"Papa?" I whispered hesitantly. I watched tears come to his eyes as he put his arms around me. I returned his embrace and felt my own blood tears stain his jacket. "Papa."

"Christina," he said, "I thought I had lost you forever."

Better for you if he had, the voice said before finally quieting.

EPILOGUE

That's all I wanted, something special
Something sacred in your eyes
Father Figure - George Michaels

I raised my hand and touched the doorbell. Somewhere deep in the house chimes rang out. I heard footsteps moving toward the door, then a rattling of a chain. A moment later Father Roger Strong opened the door.

"Christina," he said softly, "I am so glad you came. I had begun to think you had changed your mind." He motioned me inside, closing the door behind me.

I glanced at the grandfather clock standing in the foyer. "It's only just gone eight," I said.

"I expected you shortly after sundown," he replied, leading me into the living room where a large fire danced in the fireplace.

"I thought we would both be more comfortable if I stopped on my way here," I said hesitantly. "I'm not used to spending long periods of time with mortals."

"Stopped?" he asked. Then he seemed to understand. "To feed."

"Yes," I said, feeling very awkward. I looked around the room, struggling to recall some part of it, but I remembered nothing.

Roger looked down for a moment. "Did you kill?" he asked softly.

I walked to one of the tall windows and looked out into the gloom of the back yard. I thought I could see a gleam from a pool in the darkness.

"I have been Kindred for five years." I said slowly, watching the play of light on the window. "This is the only life I've ever known, I don't remember any other way to live."

I turned to face him, meeting his eyes without hesitation. "In five years I have only made one kill while feeding, and it was the first night of my life. I awoke alone, half starved and terrified in Las Vegas." I walked closer to my father and sat on the arm of a chair. "I tried to eat but I couldn't keep it down. I panicked and ran and then fell down in an alley, crying. When the woman approached me I had no control. The hunger consumed me."

I looked away, my eye going to a portrait of my father and me above the mantle. "I still think about her sometimes. Then Antonio found me and taught me how to feed without harm. But I know I will not hesitate to take another life if it would save my own. Make no mistake," I told him, looking back into his eyes, "I am a vampire."

Tears filled his eyes and he turned to wipe them away. "You were such a gentle child," he said, "full of love and learning. You used to read by the hour, anything you could get your hands on." He walked to the couch opposite of the chair I was on and sat down.

"I still read, Papa," I said, watching him.

"Do you? Do you still watch old movies?" he turned to the entertainment center along one wall. "We used to watch them all together. Do you remember?"

"No," I said not unkindly. "I remember almost nothing before that night in Las Vegas."

"What do you remember?" he asked, leaning forward.

"I remember the car you bought me for graduation. A birthday cake with purple icing. A young boy with dark hair and laughing green eyes. A kitten with white feet." I thought for a moment. "Sometimes I dream about things that feel like memories, but I have no way to tell what was real and what I have imagined."

We were silent for a few minutes, each lost in our own thoughts. Then he said, "They found the car in Alameda, not far from the airport. I brought it home and parked it in the garage. I kept thinking you would come home and it would be waiting for you."

"You still have the car?" I asked, surprised. "Here?"

"Yes," he said, standing. "Would you like to see it?"

"Yes," I said earnestly, rising and following him to the garage. When he turned on the lights, I saw a car covered in a dusty brown tarp. I pulled at a corner and to slowly reveal the yellow convertible underneath. It was almost exactly as I remembered.

I walked slowly around the car, running one hand along its side. I could see the keys in the ignition on a chain with a picture of Jon Bon Jovi. When I reached the back of the car, I noticed a small dent on the rear bumper. "What happened here?" I asked. The dent seemed out of place to me, as if it didn't belong there.

"I don't know," Roger said, frowning. "The police assumed you were rear ended in a faked accident to make you pull over. They thought that when you did someone took you and...."

"Killed me?"

He nodded.

"It seems they were correct," I murmured. I walked around the car and opened the door, climbing into the driver's seat. "Want to go for a drive?"

He smiled. "Yes." He opened the garage door and as I started the car he got in. I drove fast and hard, putting the '67 Mustang through it's paces. I drove aimlessly through the streets of Sacramento, looking at everything and trying to see something I remembered. We talked of various places we passed, places we had gone together, things we had done. I recalled nothing. I drove for about an hour, then returned to Roger's home.

We entered through the kitchen and I walked over to the pantry, pulling out a hot cocoa mix. I continued to talk to my father as I prepared it, finding everything necessary without hesitation. When the cocoa was warmed, I took down mugs and filled them with the hot beverage. Then I looked down at the mugs and laughed ruefully.

"I think I may have done this once or twice," I said, carrying the mugs over to the table where Roger was and sitting opposite him. He smiled, blowing into the cup to cool its contents.

"Can you even drink this?" he asked. "Didn't you say you got sick when you ate food?"

"Eating and drinking food is an acquired talent," I told him, letting the hot mug warm my cold hands. "It took me some time, but I finally managed to get the gist of it." I sipped at the drink. How could I have forgotten such a wonderful taste?

I smiled and asked him about the kitten I remembered. He told me of the Easter his sister, my aunt, had brought the kitten as a gift for me, and of my joy in watching the cat grow. Then he told me a car had killed her shortly before I graduated high school. I felt like he was describing someone else's life.

"What about the boy?" I asked.

"What boy" he said, bringing the cup to his lips and avoiding my gaze.

"The boy with dark hair and green eyes." I tried to remember more. "I think... a scar right here," I said, lifting my hand to a spot just below my right ear. "From the cat, I think."

"I don't remember any such boy," he said firmly.

"You don't?" I said, frowning. "But I can see him so clearly."

"Christina, would you like to see your room?" He rose and held his hand out to me. "I haven't changed it a bit. I guess I kept hoping you would come back, and you have." He smiled as I took

his hand and allowed him to lead me down the hall to a door, which he opened, flipping the light switch on. I stepped inside and looked around.

The room was at first glance neat and feminine. There were lace curtains at the windows and a ruffled comforter on the bed. The top of the dresser held a small basket full of make up and perfume. The wall behind the bed seemed to be covered with some type of mural and I walked over to get a closer look. Then I realized it wasn't a mural, it was photographs, hundreds of them, taped to the wall from floor to ceiling, corner to corner.

There were photos of animals, trees, flowers and cars, but most of the photos were of people, all kinds of people. Business men in their pressed suits, mothers watching over children, street people, construction workers, even bank tellers. Many of the pictures had children in them. Some of the pictures were not very good, as if a child had taken them. Others were somewhat better, while still others looked to have been done by a professional. Most were candid shots, but here and there an attempt had been made at a more formal look.

"This is the way I left it?" I asked.

"No," he replied. "I put these up after you disappeared.

"Who took these pictures?" I looked at him. "Did I take all of these?"

"Most of them," he said, then pointed out a few pictures I was in. "Some of your friends took the rest, or I did."

I studied the wall for a long time, asking Roger about one photograph or another, where it was taken, when, who were the people shown. He was only able to identify some of the people, telling me I had often taken pictures of strangers on the street. After a while I turned my attention from the wall to the rest of the room. I walked to stand before the bookcase.

"I see my taste hasn't changed that much," I said. "I have many of these books in my apartment now." I pulled down a book of poetry, flipping through the pages for a moment. Then I returned it to the shelf and turned back to my father. "Do you mind if I spend some time in here alone?"

"Not at all," he said. "I'll go clean up the kitchen and wait for you in the den. I have some reading to catch up on." He left the room, smiling at me as he closed the door.

I stood in the center of the room and slowly turned in a circle, looking at everything. Then I closed my eyes and threw my head back, trying to remember. *That's it*, I thought suddenly. I returned to the bookcase and knelt before it, pulling a large volume of Shakespeare off of the bottom shelf. Carefully I opened the book to page 389. I touched the words *open*, *for* and *me* in sequence and heard a small clicking sound come from the book. I turned the page to reveal a secret compartment. I walked over to the bed and set the book down.

I began to take things out and lay them on the bed. A blue ribbon tied in a bow. A dried rose sealed in plastic. A small jade statue of a cat shone green in the bedroom lights. A movie ticket stub from *Summersby*. Other items, small things, none of which I remembered.

At the very bottom of the compartment lay an envelope. I took it out and removed two photographs from it. The top one was in black and white, showing a very pregnant woman with dark hair standing near a river. I turned it over and saw written on the back in a masculine hand *Elizabeth Strong, 1967*. Below that was written *Mother and me* in a childish version of my own handwriting. I turned it back over to study her face. I could not remember her.

I looked to the other picture and stared. Standing in a clearing surrounded by trees and looking at the camera solemnly was a boy in his early teens. He had dark hair and flashing green eyes. I could see a faint scar on his neck just below his right ear. The boy was trying to look stern, but I could see laughter in his eyes. This was the boy from my nightmares, but I wasn't afraid of him. Somehow, I knew he loved me.

I slowly placed everything back into the compartment and went out to get to know my father.