



# CHRISTINA: SEARCHING FOR JASON

© *Cathy F McQuillin* 1999

 **Sanguinus Curae** Fiction Contest **FIRST PLACE**  
JULY, 2001  
C. McQUILLIN

 **Sanguinus Curae** Fiction Contest **THIRD PLACE**  
AUGUST, 2002  
C. McQUILLIN

<b>FORWARD .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>PRELUDE .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>JASON .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>THE MONASTERY .....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>CAPTURE .....</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>THE HOLDING.....</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>CLUES.....</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>INTRIGUE.....</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>A HELPING HAND .....</b>	<b>50</b>
<b>DELAYS.....</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>FALLOUT.....</b>	<b>60</b>
<b>PREPARATIONS.....</b>	<b>65</b>
<b>THE WAREHOUSE.....</b>	<b>70</b>
<b>THE COUNTESS .....</b>	<b>77</b>
<b>FLINT .....</b>	<b>83</b>
<b>MOSCOW .....</b>	<b>89</b>
<b>SEARCHING .....</b>	<b>94</b>
<b>BRUCKMAN’S.....</b>	<b>99</b>
<b>LOSS OF HOPE .....</b>	<b>104</b>
<b>WATCHERS.....</b>	<b>108</b>
<b>SECOND THOUGHTS.....</b>	<b>113</b>
<b>THE PARK.....</b>	<b>118</b>
<b>THE CALL.....</b>	<b>123</b>
<b>LUKE.....</b>	<b>130</b>
<b>OLD ACQUAINTANCES.....</b>	<b>136</b>
<b>REVELATIONS .....</b>	<b>140</b>
<b>WHERE THE HEART IS.....</b>	<b>146</b>

# FORWARD

My name is Christina Strong, and this is my story. I won't bore you with the details of where I was born, or how I grew up; I don't recall any of it anyway. I don't remember the first boy I kissed, or my mother's face. I have forgotten bedtime stories, walks with my father and going to college.

This is the story of the things I do remember, of my adopted sire and close friends. Of love both lost and found. Of the man I dearly care for and how I almost lost him completely to final death. Of course, death is usually final for most people, but as a certain cocky Brujah bastard once told me, we aren't exactly 'people' now, are we?

I sit on the roof of my apartment building with Luke Thomas at my side. I look down at the real people walking the streets of Las Vegas. The lights are bright here as I record my tale, but they weren't always so bright.

Maybe I will tell you about the day I was born, or at least the beginning of my life as I know it. It was here in Vegas, actually, on a dark September evening, just after sundown. People lined the streets just as they do tonight, and they had no idea what had awakened among them....

# 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.



# JASON

We danced so close, we danced so slow  
And I swore I'd never let you go  
Never Say Goodbye - Bon Jovi

I entered my apartment flushed and warm from a recent feeding. I hung up my coat and locked the door, then turned to check my answering machine.

The first message was from Antonio, letting me know that he and Michael Moorecock, his other adopted child, were going to Los Angeles on business.

The second was from my father, asking when I would be coming back up for a visit. I sighed, knowing that I should probably visit him soon but not quite able to look forward to it. I had felt awkward around Papa since the night I had met him in San Francisco. Papa had discovered I was still alive and I, of course, couldn't remember him.

The last message made me smile.

"Christina, why did I give you a cell phone if you won't carry it?" Jason's voice chided me. "Look, I'd like you to come to San Francisco tomorrow night," he continued. "Give me a call, *my* cell phone is on."

Jason Kline was truly a product of the electronic age. He thought everyone should be reachable all of the time. I preferred privacy occasionally, especially when feeding, but I was glad that he had called.

He was something of an enigma to me. Well, to everyone, really. Jason was mortal but seemed Kindred, and lived by the belief that the less your enemies knew about you, the less power they had over you. And Jason's 'employer,' Graves, had many enemies.

Being with Jason was like rediscovering my teen years. He was dependable, strong, romantic and very attractive. His many disguises and aliases only made him more interesting and mysterious. Jason had also saved my life repeatedly and without hesitation.

I couldn't tell Jason how I felt about him; I lacked the basic boy-girl relationship skills to do so. That didn't seem to matter because I could tell he knew how I felt. He didn't try to take advantage of my feelings, and for that I cared about him even more. I knew without asking that he felt the same way about me.

My only regret about being a vampire was that I could never have a normal life with Jason, that I could never be a normal girlfriend or wife for him. We would never live in a house in the suburbs, we would never belong to a car pool, we would never watch our children run laughing in the sunlight.

I thought back to the first time that I had seen Jason, or 'August,' as he had called himself then.

*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.*

I brought my mind back to the present and picked up the phone to dial Jason's number. I walked over to the overstuffed couch in my living room and sat down. He answered on the second ring.

"Christina?" he said with a mild Spanish accent. "How are you doing?"

"Fine, 'Martín,'" I replied. 'Martín DePorres' was his current alias. "I just got home. How are you?"

"Terrible," he said. "You must fly to San Francisco first thing tomorrow evening to make it all better."

I laughed. "I hardly think my presence alone can cure what ails you."

"You'd be surprised," he told me seriously. "Really, I'd like you to fly in tomorrow. You'll never make it tonight." It was only about an hour before dawn.

"What's up?" I asked. "Is there a hurry?"

"I have us booked on a flight to the Caymans the day after tomorrow," he replied. "I've made all of the arrangements so you'll be completely safe." He paused a moment, then added, "I know you need some time away. Tell me how you are really doing."

I looked up at a large painting above the television. It portrayed a young woman looking out over an oceanfront cliff at a brilliantly colored sunrise. A part of my mind wondered if I had ever seen a sunrise like that.

"Better," I said honestly.

"No more nightmares about Salem?" he pressed.

Less than a week before, Jason had rescued me from a dungeon Salem, Massachusetts. The prince, Beth, had kept me locked in a room with a weak inner cell that held a human for me to feed upon. To her disappointment I had refused, knowing that the man was the father of a good friend of mine. Beth had died at the hands of Michael and Antonio.

"They are fading," I said slowly. I didn't mention that the other nightmares were still with me, the ones I'd been having for the past five years but never seemed to remember upon waking, shaking and drenched in fear.

"Martín?"

"Yes?"

"Thanks for coming for me." I said softly.

"I could have done nothing else, remember?" he said, affection strong in his voice. "My life for yours."

"I remember everything about you." I told him with a smile. And I did.

Jason was quiet for a moment, then said, "Can you come, Christina? I'd really like to see you again."

"I'd love to come, 'Martín,'" I told him. "What time is my flight?" He gave me the necessary information. "I'll be there," I said.

"I'll be waiting," he replied.

I got up and went over to replace the phone in its base, then opened the drawer in the table and pulled out a framed picture.

It had taken me several weeks to convince Jason to let me take a photograph of him without any disguises. We had gone up to the roof of my apartment building and he had stood near its edge, the lights of Las Vegas spread out behind him. He looked so different without his disguises. His blond hair fell low on his forehead and his hazel eyes shone bright and clear in the camera flash.

I took the picture with me upstairs to the sleeping loft. I placed it on the bedside stand and went into the bathroom. Glancing in the mirror, I noticed a spot on my shirt. "Damn," I muttered. I moistened a washcloth and dabbed at the bloodstain. It came out rather quickly, as it had not quite dried.

I undressed and got into the shower. I closed my eyes and let the hot water ease my mind. Salem was never far from my thoughts, but I was beginning to put the hunger and the cell I had been a prisoner in behind me.

As I dried myself off, I watched my reflection. My long dark hair fell in soft waves well past my shoulders. My body would remain that of a twenty-three year old forever, tall and lithe. I had an athletic build from being a track star in high school and then in college, or so Papa had told me. I couldn't remember.

I stood straight and turned first one way then the other. I wondered if Jason was attracted to me. I grinned. "Perhaps we'll find out in the Caymans," I promised myself.

I turned out the lights and lay down in the bed. I soon felt the sleep of the dead overtake me as the sun rose in the desert sky.

When I stepped off the plane the following evening, Jason was indeed waiting for me. His long dark hair hung past his shoulders and, once again, I was enthralled by his eyes. It never seemed to matter to me what color they were; his eyes always had the power to make me weak in the knees.

Jason kissed my cheek and handed me a dozen blood red roses. I smiled and hugged him. "Thank you," I said.

"The limousine is waiting," he replied. He took my hand and led me out into the warm California night. The driver opened the car door for us and Jason released my hand as I got in.

"Would you like to change before we go to dinner?" he asked. "I have reservations at a very nice restaurant on the bay."

"Unless they don't mind jeans, I suppose I'd better," I said. "How nice is this restaurant?" I had packed for the islands, although I should have expected to need formal clothing while with Jason.

"Actually, I have made arrangements to stop and pick up a gown for you," he replied. "If you don't mind."

I smiled. "Of course not."

The limousine pulled up in front of an exclusive shop a few minutes later. Jason escorted me inside where we were met by a trio of expectant mortals whose only task seemed to be pleasing me.

Jason excused himself to change into a tuxedo while I found the perfect dress. It was long, black, tight and sequined with a plunging neckline and a skirt slit to mid-thigh. When I went back to the car, Jason looked awestruck.

We drove to the restaurant and were escorted to a corner table with large windows and an excellent view of the bay. After we had been served the main course, Jason asked about my father.

"He's doing well, I believe," I said, smiling. "He was worried about our disappearance. I'm afraid I had to tell him we went off together on a romantic getaway."

Jason grinned. "We did end up together. Are you still getting on well with him?"

"As well as can be expected given the circumstances." I replied. "I think it would help if I could remember more of my past."

After a moment, Jason leaned forward. "Christina, I haven't asked you this before as I didn't want to pry, but would you like me to look into his past? Or yours?" My face must have shown my surprise for he added, "Didn't you ever think about it?"

"It just didn't occur to me not to take him at his word," I whispered, looking down at my food. "However, there are some things he won't talk about."

"The green-eyed boy?" Jason asked. "I've seen the picture. Roger still won't talk about him?"

"No."

I had found a picture of a dark haired boy in his early teens standing beneath a maple tree. The boy had dark hair and flashing green eyes. I could just make out a faint scar on his neck below his right ear. The boy was trying to look stern, but I could see laughter in his face. I had seen the same boy in one of the few nightmares I remembered, but my father refused to admit he even existed.

"I just assumed he was a boyfriend that Papa didn't like from where I grew up."

"Helena."

"Yes."

It was difficult learning about my mortal self and knowing I may never remember anything more about it than I already did. I was silent for a moment as I looked out the window without seeing the view. "Do I really need to know?" I asked softly. "Is it even relevant anymore? After all, as much as I used to be Christina Strong, daughter of Roger Strong and student at Berkley, I don't remember any of it now. It doesn't seem real to me."

"It's your choice," Jason replied. "I won't look into it unless you want me to."

I met his eyes, my mind warring with my heart. "I guess you could do some checking," I said at last. "Just don't tell me what you find out until I ask you to."

"Of course."

"Unless there is something really important that I should know," I added, not knowing what that could possibly be. I became aware of the bracelet on my wrist and again wondered where I had gotten it.

"Not a problem," he said, then he sighed. "We do, however, have a different problem. We have to postpone our trip to the Caymans."

"Why?" I was dismayed, having looked forward to spending time alone with Jason.

"My... 'employer' has asked me to travel to London for him, then transport an item to Mid-Eastern Europe. It should only take a week or so," he told me, "and I thought it would give me a chance to show you the monastery."

His 'employer' was Graves, a low generation Gangrel, and he frequently sent Jason away on missions. I had never met Graves, but I found it hard not to resent his infrequent intrusions into our lives. I had to remind myself that because Jason was Graves' ghoul, he was obligated to do anything Graves asked him to, no matter what the consequences, but I really didn't understand the hold the man had over Jason.

"The monastery?" I asked, confused.

"Where I was raised," he said. "I would like you to see it."

I was pleasantly surprised, Jason had never asked me to accompany him on a mission before. "I take it you want me to go with you to Europe?"

"Yes," he replied firmly. "That is, if you would like to go with me. We could go to the Caymans, or the Bahamas, or wherever you would like as soon as the item is delivered."

I smiled. "I'd be delighted to accompany you, 'Martín.'"

"I have made all the arrangements," he told me and my smile grew into a grin. "We'll leave tonight and stay tomorrow in Salem. You will have a chance to see Brenda before we fly out tomorrow night."

Brenda Thompson, my sister in that she was also Antonio's child, had visited me briefly before driving back to Salem. She was now studying with the Tremere Chantry there at the new prince's request. Brenda's father was the mortal that Beth had wanted me to feed from, and I had barely been able to resist.

"That would be great," I said.

After we had eaten, the band played a slow ballad and Jason asked me to dance. With a smile I took his hand and followed him to the dance floor. We had danced many times over the past few months and I knew we moved together well.

Jason held one of my hands near his chest and put an arm around my waist. He spread his fingers in the small of my back and I put an arm around his neck to play with his hair at his nape. I looked up into his dark eyes and he smiled down at me affectionately.

As we moved about the floor, Jason pulled me closer to him until our bodies touched and his chin rested lightly against my temple. He hummed along to the words of love the singer crooned and I allowed myself to believe he meant the words she sang.

"Love, I want to hold you forever/Forget the cares of yesterday/Tell you how much I love you/And let the world fade away."

Our bodies fit together perfectly as we moved around the floor. Slowly I inhaled the scent of Jason's skin beneath his subtle cologne. Very faintly I smelled the Kindred vitae within him and I

smiled. Jason was a wonderful dancer and I loved being in his arms. I enjoyed every movement, every touch of his body on mine.

That dance seems frozen in my memory now, as sharp, clear and real to me as my own skin. I'd never felt in my whole existence the way I felt in Jason's arms. I wanted it to go on forever, needed it to, but of course it didn't, it couldn't. At the end of the song we walked hand in hand back to our table.

After we sat down, I asked, "Has anyone found Lucy?" Lucy was a little girl who had also been a captive in Salem. She'd gone missing after Jason had brought her back to San Francisco.

"Actually, yes," he replied, leaning forward. "You might find this interesting. She turned up in Flint while Brenda and the others were still looking for Beth's box. Get this: she's Kindred."

"What?" It is usually very easy to tell Kindred from mortals. I had spent quite a bit of time with Lucy before our capture, and if she were Kindred, I should have known. "When was she embraced?"

"Some time ago, it appears. She's Assamite."

Assamites are the assassins of the Kindred community. They could only be hired by princes, and always took their payment in blood. They were also experts at disguise. I had once nearly been killed by an Assamite who had been impersonating Jason.

"Who was she after?" I asked.

"Apparently she was supposed to keep Beth from getting the box." Jason shook his head. "Michael was very upset about the whole thing until he discovered she'd been hired by Stuart Williams, the prince of Flint. He has since forgiven her for the deception." He chuckled softly. "From what I hear, she talked him into going to an amusement park. Without a suit."

"That I would have to see," I replied dryly. I had never seen Michael out of a business suit, and he always looked impeccable.

"She's sending me pictures," Jason said. We both laughed.

Soon after, we left the restaurant and went directly to the airport. During the flight to Boston, Jason went over our aliases with me.

"I will be Philippe Roache," he told me, "a French insurance salesman going home from an extended business trip in the states."

We sat in the cockpit of the private jet he used when he was travelling. He had put the automatic pilot on only moments before, and now he turned to face me, a small jewelry box in his hands.

"You will be Christina Roache, my new wife." He opened the box and took out a beautiful engagement ring and wedding band. The diamond on the engagement ring was very large, nearly a full carat. The wedding band was intricately engraved with vines and leaves; the leaves twined together in such a way that the two rings appeared one.

I sat stunned, staring at it; I'd never expected to wear his ring, even in this type of situation.

"We met in San Francisco and I fell for you instantly," he continued as he slid the ring on my finger and raised my hand to his lips. His eyes told me that part of the story was indeed true. "We had a whirlwind courtship and were married in Las Vegas. Now we are on our honeymoon traveling through Europe before we return to Paris where we will live in bliss for the rest of our nights."

I laughed softly at his words and studied the ring. The diamond glittered brightly in the cabin lighting.

"Don't you have a ring to wear?" I asked him.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out another small box. "I thought you'd never ask, Christina."

I took the box from his hand and opened it. The man's band inside matched my rings perfectly. I took it out and reached for his hand.

"Are you proposing?" he asked half in jest.

I looked up at him in surprise. "Excuse me?"

"Well, I don't wear just any woman's ring," he said with a smile.

I knew he was joking with me, so I decided to play his game. I shrugged and put the ring back into the box and tried to hand it back to him. "If you're not interested...."

He refused to take the box from me. "Christina, you know I'd wear *your* ring with pleasure," he whispered seriously. His eyes caught me and for a moment I could think of nothing else. Then he held his hand out to me.

I glanced at it, then opened the box and removed the ring. I took his hand in mine, enjoying the warmth of his skin. I slowly slid the ring on his finger and looked up at him. His sweet smile would have knocked me off of my feet if I had been standing.

I reached up and cupped his cheek in my hand. "Aren't you going to kiss the bride?"

He grinned and bent closer to me. My arms went around his neck as he pulled me closer and kissed me gently.

We stayed over the day in Salem, and I had a chance to talk to Brenda. She was more than happy for the opportunity to study in the chantry there. It helped that Salem was so far away from Vegas and Michael, they'd had a falling out about her embrace and he still hadn't gotten over it.

I also talked a little with Micky George. He was a childe of Elvira Van Dorn, the new Salem prince, and he seemed familiar to me somehow, but I couldn't place him.

It helped my peace of mind to be back in Salem. I made time to go back to the room I'd been held in. Elvira had ordered the wall Jason had destroyed repaired and everything completely cleared from the room, including the bars of the inner cell.

I stood for a moment in the center of the room with Jason at my side and looked around. I closed my eyes, remembering the hunger and the pain. Then I let it slip away from me and was able to begin the process of dismissing the experience to the past. I didn't have nightmares for several nights, and when I did, they weren't about Salem, they were about Italy and Jason.

On the flight to London from Boston, Jason changed into his new alias. His hair was very dark, nearly black, and fell just to his shoulders. He wore very blue contacts and a mustache that tickled my skin when he kissed my cheek.

We arrived in the early morning hours and went directly to our hotel. Jason had arranged for us to have a suite that contained two bedrooms. I didn't know whether to be happy that he had considered my feelings or not.

The next evening we exited the hotel to find a carriage drawn by a white horse waiting for us. Jason helped me up into the seat then moved in beside me. I could distinctly smell the blood in his veins and put the mild hunger I felt aside.

Jason had asked me not to present myself to the London prince, as is the usual custom when entering another city, so I decided to forego feeding while we were there. I assumed, correctly as it turned out, that Jason didn't want anyone to know we were in London, no matter how briefly. He had offered to let me feed from him, but as I had drunk my fill before we'd left Salem, I refused.

We rode through London holding hands, watching people and looking at the architecture. We stopped at a few places to take a closer look at the buildings at several tourist locations. At one such

stop we found ourselves at a large museum. Upon reentering the carriage, a tall dark figure shrouded in long robes and carrying an ancient valise got in with us.

Jason introduced the stranger as Mr. Rawley. When the man kissed my hand in greeting I realized he was Kindred. While the hooded cloak he wore concealed most of his features, I was able to get glimpses of his face in the streetlights. He seemed to be average looking but completely bald and sounded like a native of England. I thought he might be Nosferatu, but couldn't be sure.

We continued our journey, saying little, and at the next stop Mr. Rawley got out of the carriage while we remained inside. I noticed he left the valise behind, and when we pulled away Jason moved it closer to himself. I dismissed the valise from my mind when Jason put his arm around me and pointed out a pair of street mimes on the next corner.

Near dawn, we returned to the hotel and I watched Jason secure the valise carefully before I excused myself. I went to my bedroom and fell asleep as the sun rose.



# THE MONASTERY

And now I can't hold back the dawn  
And the truth that seems to haunt me  
Change - Melissa Etheridge

Upon rising the next evening we flew to Italy. Jason kept the valise close to him even when we were alone on the plane. I wondered what was inside that was so important, but I respected Jason's privacy, so I didn't ask.

After we landed, Jason rented a car and we drove nearly three hours to a small village in the hills. Jason pointed out various structures to me as we drove up the mountain. Near the top of the mountain lay the ruins of several buildings. Parts of a chapel had been rebuilt, but the rest of the grounds looked like the scattered building blocks of a child.

"This is it," Jason said, opening the door of the car for me. "This is where I was raised."

Jason explained how he'd been brought to the monastery when he was six and told he was destined to serve. He had been trained in the ways of God, weapons, and hunting – hunting supernatural creatures like Kindred and Magi.

"They told me I was marked," he said, opening his shirt and pulling aside his golden cross necklace to reveal a tattoo in the same shape, "and then they marked me."

"Knights Templar?" I whispered, touching his skin. It was the first time I'd seen his bare chest and the symbol imprinted in his flesh.

"Yeah," he replied.

"Then we both carry a cross," I said, referring to the cross-shaped birthmark high on my left shoulder.

Jason smiled and took my hand. He went on to tell me of the night before he was to go on his first hunt. Two Kindred came to the monastery, one to eliminate and the other to save him. A great fight ensued, and the monastery was destroyed. Many of the people and monks living on the grounds were murdered, and Jason himself was nearly killed.

"When Graves saved me, I cursed him," Jason said softly, his eyes looking out over the ruins and seeing the past. "Can you believe it? I cursed him and demanded to know why he hadn't killed me." He sighed and took my hand to lead me into the ruins.

"He told me that I was in fact destined for something great, and that he thought I should get to know the enemy before I started destroying them. Eventually I was able to thank him, and respect him as my 'employer,' for he has great power and great wisdom."

I wondered briefly if Jason would feel the same if the blood bond that made him a ghoul didn't tie him to Graves. Instantly I was ashamed of myself, as if the resentment I felt for Graves made me somehow disloyal to the man at my side.

Jason led me down a rubble littered stairway, then through several dark corridors and into a wine cellar. He talked softly about what the monastery had been like before its destruction. He showed me several bottles of wine he had been saving that had somehow survived the devastation.

"How long ago did this happen?" I asked.

"Ten years," he said sadly.

We made our way slowly back to the chapel and into an antechamber Jason had prepared for our stay. It was nearing dawn, and as we readied ourselves for the day I heard what sounded like an electronic pager begin to vibrate. Jason removed a device from his waist and pressed one of the buttons on its surface. I watched a small screen pop up and stood to get a better look.

"What is it?" I asked. As I watched, a flashing red light began to move slowly toward the center of the screen.

"Perimeter breach," he replied absently, then turned to me and put a hand on my shoulder. "Christina, I need you to do something very important for me."

"What?"

"Do you think you can find the wine cellar again?" When I nodded, he said, "I need you to take the valise down there and keep it with you until I come for you."

"Philippe," I said, using his alias, "you might need my help."

"It's almost dawn," he replied, "and this is more important." He glanced down at the screen where the red light was closer to the center. "Promise me you won't try to help. You can't do me any good in the sunlight anyway."

Suddenly a booming voice rang out. "Mr. Christopher, where are you?"

I looked at Jason in surprise. He hadn't used the name August Christopher since we had left New York together several months before.

"Wait," the voice continued, "isn't it Senior DePorres now?"

To my amazement, Jason actually looked nervous. He grabbed my shoulders and shook me slightly. "Promise me," he demanded.

"I promise," I whispered. I was taken aback to see him so rattled.

"One more thing," he said, pulling a ring case from his pocket. He opened the case to reveal a clear crystal about a quarter of an inch in diameter. It looked like a diamond and was larger than the gem on my hand.

"Jason...." I whispered very softly.

"I want you to keep this on you at all times," he told me. "Cut yourself and heal over it, or swallow it, just keep it hidden on yourself at all times, Christina. It will help me find you—"

Those words struck a familiar chord deep within me, but before I could remember what they reminded me of, the voice called out again, full of menace and anger.

"Maybe its Monsieur Roache now, heh? I don't care who you say you are today, come out and bring it to me!"

I took the gem and swallowed it. Immediately, the bracelet on my wrist grew hot, nearly burning my skin. "Jason," I pleaded in a low voice ignoring the pain on my wrist, "can't you hide with me?"

"No," he said. "He would find us both and you must protect what I've given you."

"Jason...." I whispered again as I looked into his eyes.

I wanted to say so much more, to tell him how I felt about him, about being with him, but he put a finger on my lips. The wedding band he wore glittered briefly in the dim light.

"Shh," he said, smiling to reassure me. "We'll talk about it later." He pulled me into his arms and kissed me quickly. "Now go!"

I ran down the darkened hallway without turning to watch him enter the chapel. I darted through the wine cellar door and closed it softly, then quietly dragged a wine rack over to block the door. I looked around for somewhere to hide the valise, but I didn't see anywhere for it to go that wasn't blatantly obvious.

The bracelet finally cooled and I spun it on my wrist, checking for damage to my skin, but there was no mark. Had the gem reacted to the bracelet in some way? Did they both have some kind of magical properties? I had no way to know and now wasn't the time to think about it.

I could hear shots fired from Jason's gun somewhere above me. Then I heard a great wind and the foundation of the church shook.

Sunrise was coming; I could feel unconsciousness pulling at my mind. I fought it desperately while twisting the ring Jason had given me and trying to figure out what was going on above the rising wind.

Suddenly the door was flung open and the wine rack spun to the side, broken. An old man stood in the doorway, dark and menacing. I pointed my Glock at him and he raised his hands.

"I can't help your friend," he told me hurriedly, his words thickly accented. "Come with me, you will be safe."

"Who are you?" I demanded. "Why are you here?"

"I am a friend," he said impatiently. "I am here to give you help. We must go!"

The gunfire had stopped just after the door had opened, and now I heard that horrible voice again. "Where is it? I must have it!"

"Come *now*," said the Italian urgently.

"I can't," I cried softly. "I can't, the sun is coming up! I can't be in the sunlight!"

For a moment he looked at me in contemplation, then whipped off his dark cloak and wrapped it around me as I stood holding my gun and the valise.

"Give me your hand," he said, holding his toward me.

I hesitated, but something told me to trust him. I put the gun in its holster at the small of my back and gave the man my hand. Before I could pull away, he quickly made a small cut on my palm, then a similar one on his. He put our bleeding hands together and mumbled something I didn't catch in Latin, then rubbed the blood that had gathered on his hand onto the cloak.

"Our blood will protect you," he said urgently, "Come."

I realized instantly that my fatigue had left me and I followed him down a corridor that Jason had not shown me. After about a hundred feet, it led to a stairway and up into the light.

For a moment I was held by the wonder of the sun rising over the mountains, the amazement of the first sunrise I could remember. Then I heard an agonized scream. I spun toward the church and heard the booming voice demanding again to know where 'it' was. I assumed 'it' was the valise I still held.

I gasped to see Jason bound to the altar by glowing bands of blue light, his face a mask of pain. As I watched, light flew from the hands of a tall wrinkled crone-like man with long straggled hair who stood before the altar. Jason's body arched in a paroxysm of torment and his mouth opened in a soundless scream.

I took a step toward the church, tortured by Jason's pain and desperate to kill the mage who was punishing him so. The Italian grabbed my arm and spun me away from the church.

"We must go," he said softly. "We are in great danger. If he sees us, he will kill us both."

"He's killing 'Philippe,'" I said just as softly.

"He won't kill him until he finds what you hold," the Italian replied. "We must get it and you away from here now."

With a final glance at the altar, I hurried after the man. As we ran, I grew despondent. I wanted to return and help Jason, but every time I slowed the Italian grabbed my arm and pulled me along. I knew that Jason would want me to keep the valise away from the mage who held him, but I agonized over leaving him there.

Eventually we slowed to a walk. I became aware of the world dawning around me, grew almost hypnotized by it. I had no memories of daylight, and the morning woods fascinated me. Birds sang and flew among the leaves, small animals peered out from behind the trees, and flowers bloomed at our feet.

I was awestruck by the light and beauty all around me. I looked at the sun until my eyes hurt, trying to memorize every detail. I longed for my camera, still in my bags at the church. I ached; I wanted to share this magical time with Jason yet I knew that his torture was the price I paid for this gift.

After nearly an hour and a half, we walked into a small village on the hillside. The Italian went to the door of one of the houses and knocked. A woman who looked in her forties opened the door and spoke to him in Italian. He replied in kind, then gestured for me to enter the house before him.

He conversed with the woman for several minutes, calling her Maria. When they finished, Maria motioned for me to follow her into one of the back rooms of the house.

I entered the bedroom, which was simply furnished and had no windows. A wash basin and pitcher sat on a dresser against one wall and a bed was opposite. The woman spoke again, pointing first at me then at the bed. When she started gesturing sleep, I sat on the bed with the valise in my lap. Maria seemed placated, and motioned for me to lie down. Then she left the room, closing the door behind her.

I looked around for a moment, then undid the clasp on the cloak and let it fall to the bed. Immediately exhaustion overcame me and I lay back. I clutched the valise as I fell into a sleep troubled by dreams that were more memories than nightmares.

*I was at the New York prince's home looking through his library and waiting for my friends to return. 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....*

*...And the dream shifted to the monastery. Jason was on the altar, he was screaming, and I couldn't move, couldn't reach him, couldn't save him. Repeatedly the mage wrapped his blue agony around Jason's body and there was nothing I could do to stop him....*

The next evening I awoke disoriented. I sat up quickly and tried to get my bearings. As I looked around, I realized I was still in the bedroom of the small cottage the Italian had brought me to that morning. Everything looked the same as it had been when I had fallen asleep.

I looked down at the valise still clutched in my arms and opened it. Inside were many electrical gadgets, the kind Jason adored. A palmtop computer with a small LCD display and a keypad were among them. Also in the case was a bone that looked very old and seemed to be sealed on either end with wax.

I put the bone back and pulled out a pouch that held a Glock 22 identical to the one I carried. The pouch also contained two empty clips and four different types of shells. The only kind of shell I recognized was the phosphorous rounds. I loaded one clip with those shells and another with some that seemed to be silver. I placed the gun and the spare clip back into the valise.

I took out the remaining item, which was a planner of some sort. I opened it and found our used airline ticket stubs, and unused train tickets. The planner was organized by country. Under each country was a list of names and numbers.

The train tickets were to a small village in Austria. I turned to the section in the planner labeled Austria and found a phone number for Her Ladyship Lena Stockton.

I picked up my cell phone and dialed Antonio's number. After a few minutes, the operator informed me that there was no answer. I looked at my watch and cursed silently; it was still full daylight in Los Angeles.

I gave the operator the number listed for Lady Stockton. She told me there was no response from the European continent, and asked if I wanted to try that number in America as I had the previous call. I agreed. While I waited for the connection, a light on my phone began to blink; the battery was low. A moment later my call was answered.

"Hello?" a woman with a cultured American voice said.

"Yes, is this Lady Lena Stockton?" I asked.

She hesitated. "Yes it is."

"You don't know me, but I was traveling with someone I believe to be a friend of yours and we were separated. I found your number in his planner."

"A friend?" she asked. "Who?"

What could I tell her? I didn't know if she would recognize Jason's true name. "Well, I'm not sure what name you know him by, but right now he's 'Philippe Roache.'"

"Ah..." she murmured, and I realized she knew Jason very well.

"We were traveling in Italy and were separated. I found train tickets to a village in Austria, but I need help. I have to find Philippe quickly, he is in great danger."

"What is your number?"

I gave it to her and warned her that my battery was low.

"Meet me at the village—" she began, but my phone went dead, cutting her off in mid sentence. Slowly I lowered it from my ear and closed the case. I had no idea what village she referred to and no idea how to get there.

I returned everything to the valise. As I was placing the planner inside, a sealed envelope fell out. It had no writing on it, and seemed to hold a letter.

I hesitated to open the letter. On the one hand, I needed as much information as possible to find Jason; on the other, I didn't want to intrude on areas of Jason's life that had always been off limits to me. *Even if he were dead?* a voice asked in my mind. I shook the thought away and put the envelope back in the planner and then both items back in the valise.

I went into the main room of the house to find that the Italian man had gone and Maria was alone. I tried to ask her where the man was but I couldn't quite communicate the question to her.

Maria put a plate of food on the table and gestured for me to sit. It was some type of chicken stew, and I ate it sparingly while Maria chattered away in Italian.

When I had finished, I thanked the woman and returned to the bedroom for my things. As soon as I walked back out carrying them, Maria became upset, obviously trying to convince me to stay, her actions conveying danger in the night. I smiled but motioned that I had to go.

Maria held a hand up, then went to a box on the fireplace mantle. She came back with a silver chain and placed it around my neck. I looked down at the delicate silver crucifix now hanging between my breasts, then kissed her on the cheek. I thanked her again and walked out into the night.

# CAPTURE

Locked in a box with a fight  
That won't shine  
You Say - Vertical Horizons

Once outside, I looked around to find the direction the old man and I had entered the village from earlier that day. I climbed a small rise but everything looked so much different in the dark and I couldn't tell where we had come into the village. I spotted a bright patch in the sky and decided to head in that direction.

After walking for several hours, I stumbled into another village. It was larger than the one I had left, and there were several cars about. I located a tavern but it was closing and only a few drunken stragglers loitered about the streets. I felt hunger tug at the fringes of my mind but held back; I knew I didn't want to be intoxicated while trying to find Jason and I couldn't risk revealing what I was.

I found a car parked behind a building and stripped a wire from one of the valise's sides to jimmy the door lock. I got into the driver's seat and reached under the steering wheel to pull down the ignition wires. I was grateful that Jason had been showing me a few tricks as I stripped the necessary wires and touched them together.

After a few false starts, the engine roared to life. I immediately put it into gear and drove off in the direction I believed civilization lay. I heard some people shouting in Italian and one man leaned out a window, yelling as I drove past while a woman, perhaps his wife, tried to pull him back in.

I had been driving for over an hour without seeing any houses or other buildings when the car began to stutter and lose speed. With a final shake, it stalled and I steered it toward the side of the road. I looked down at the instrument panel and saw that the gas tank was empty. I muttered obscenities under my breath while wondering what to do next.

I reached over and opened the glove box. I found a map within and after a little while I was able to figure out my approximate location. I got out and opened the trunk. A blanket, a bottle of wine and a toolbox lay within. I rummaged in the toolbox, pulling out a roll of tape. I put the wine in the satchel and took the blanket, glancing at the horizon as I closed the trunk. The sun would be up soon.

I pushed the car into some bushes and got back inside. I wrapped myself in my jacket and the blanket and laid down on the floor in the back seat. Soon I fell into a deep slumber.

I was stiff and sore as I got out of the car the next evening. My skin was bright pink from the lack of protection against the sun. I cursed softly as I healed myself, remembering too late the Tremere ritual that would have kept the sun out of the car.

When my skin had resumed its normal color, I put on my jacket and grabbed the cloak, valise and blanket. I headed down the road, alternating between walking and jogging to cover the most ground possible in the least amount of time. I knew I didn't want to use what blood remained in my body unless I had to.

As I traveled, I was torn. Should I go back to the monastery and try to find Jason there? Or should I continue toward our original destination and deliver the valise as Jason had intended? One path risked his life, the other his honor.

Of course, I knew that he could already be dead. If I went to this village in Austria, perhaps Lady Stockton could help me find Jason.



I was several miles down the road when a motorcycle passed me and stopped twenty feet in front of me. I had been so deep in thought that I hadn't heard the engine. A large masculine looking woman sat on the motorcycle and glared at me in the moonlight.

"Can you help me?" I asked taking a step forward. "I need to get to a telephone quickly. It's very important."

"American?" the woman said in a thickly accented voice, her tall body hunched over the handlebars.

"Yes," I replied, gesturing urgently, "I'm an American and I need to get to a phone. My husband and I were travelling to Austria. We were attacked and separated and I must get to a phone."

The woman simply looked at me. After several minutes I began to think she couldn't speak English.

I tried again. "My car broke down—"

"Senior Rosa's car broke down," She stated bluntly, getting off the bike. She was very tall for a woman, over six feet.

Damn. "Senior Rosa's car ran out of gas and I need to get to a town as soon as possible, one with a phone. I believe my husband is in terrible danger."

"What is your husband's name?" she asked. She moved around the bike and began walking toward me.

"Philippe Roache," I replied. "Will you help me?" Something about the woman struck me as strange and abruptly I realized that my bracelet had grown warm on my wrist.

"That is a French name," she said.

"That's right."

"This is not France. How did you come to be in Italy?" She moved a few steps closer to me, and I took a step back.

"We traveled from America," I said.

"There is an old American saying," she drawled, her accent making it difficult for me to make out her words, "'you can't get there from here.'"

"We flew to London first, then to Rome," I whispered, feeling very nervous about her movements toward me and wondering why it mattered how I had gotten to Italy.

I took several steps backward. "Then we rented a car and drove to the place my husband was raised."

"I thought you said he was French?" she said smiling smugly.

"I believe he was born there," I lied, "but he was raised at a church in the mountains."

The woman stopped and looked at me intently. "The monastery?"

"Yes," I said slowly, "he did call it a monastery."

"This man you were traveling with," she demanded, "what is his true name?"

I regarded the woman closely for a moment. Somehow, she seemed to know when I lied to her. "Jason Kline."

"The priest?" The woman's voice was incredulous.

"I believe he left the church some years ago," I told her. I was confused that she knew so much about of Jason.

"But he is not your husband," she stated.

"We were traveling as man and wife," I admitted. "Look, is this important? I have to get to a phone so I can find him. He was attacked and I was forced to leave him."

Suddenly I became aware that the woman was quite near me, close to three feet away. I shifted my burden and reached behind my back for my gun.

Before I could pull it out of the holster, the woman lunged at me. Unable to dodge out of the way, I was pinned underneath the unbelievably strong woman, who began sniffing at my neck.

Unconsciously my canines extended and I opened my mouth to drink from her.

"You are telling the truth—" The woman stopped as she pulled back slightly and saw my teeth gleaming in the moonlight.

I pushed her off of me and as I rose to my feet I said, "Look, I don't want any trouble and I don't want to hurt you, I just need to find Jason!"

The woman lunged at me again, and this time I found myself rolling in the road about thirty feet from where I'd left the ground, landing near the motorcycle. Unbelievably, I still held the valise. I stumbled to my feet and went for the motorcycle.

I heard a howling as I climbed on the bike and looked back over my shoulder. The woman was changing, becoming half woman, half wolf!

*You had to piss off a Garou,* I heard in my mind as I searched frantically for the ignition.

Before I could find the switch to start the bike, the werewolf was upon me. She wrenched me from the seat and threw me onto the ground. Her hands were at my throat, my death written on her face.

"Stop!" I cried, making eye contact with the wolf-woman. The Garou stopped for a moment, then loosened her grip and began to howl. Numbly I heard an answering canine cry in the distance.

Soon her friends joined us and several of them pulled me to my feet. I was dragged to the road and stripped of all possessions. They threw me into the car I had stolen, which had been refilled with gas.

Surrounded by werewolves, some human, some half-transformed, but all looking at me with contempt, I had a very uncomfortable ride back to the village I had been in so briefly the night before. When the car stopped, I was yanked out and thrown against a large rock that stood in the Village Square.

Questions began to fly; who was I, where was the priest, where was I going. There were too many questions for me to possibly answer at once.

I stood painfully and told them that Jason was a close friend and that we were traveling to a small village in Austria to meet a friend of his. I said we had stopped at the ruins of an old monastery and were attacked.

I told them of Jason's orders to stay in the wine cellar and of the old man who took me to the first village, then about trying to find a way back to the church but being unable to do so. I explained my unease about asking for help in a town where I knew no one in the middle of the night. I finished by saying that I had to find Jason and that I feared for his life.

I did not mention the package Jason had been sent to deliver, as I believed that he would not want that fact revealed. Unfortunately, they did not believe any part of my story and kept asking me repeatedly what I had done with the priest.

Finally, near dawn, they threw me into a pine box, along with the extra clip I had prepared for my gun. After they nailed the top on, I could feel and hear them drag the box on the ground for a short distance. Frantically I tried to find a way out but I was trapped. As I felt the box being lifted, the languor of morning overcame me and for a time I knew nothing.

I awoke to complete darkness and felt jerky movements, as if I was lying in the back of a moving vehicle. *The box*, I thought, *I'm still in the box*. The vehicle seemed to be moving down an uneven road at a steady rate of speed.

I put out my hands and felt around myself. I found the clip they had thrown in after me, and remembered hearing the derisive tone of their words as they tossed it in. I placed the clip in my jacket pocket.

I wondered where the Garou were taking me and where the valise was. I realized that I had lost my only link to Jason and I groaned in despair. I did take the fact that I was still alive as a good sign because werewolves were known to kill Kindred on sight. Many of the villagers had indeed wanted me dead.

I levered my legs up and tried pushing against the lid but it didn't budge. I laid back and weighed my options. I realized that I could increase my strength and try to force my way out but for two things; if I failed, I would be close to frenzy from lack of blood. Even if I escaped the box, which seemed unlikely, I would probably be surrounded by werewolves who would be more than a little pissed that I'd gotten out of my box.

Faintly I heard a voice come through the wood near my head. "Vampire," it taunted. I thought was the same woman who'd captured me on the road. "Are you awake in your coffin, vampire?"

"What do you want?" I called out to her. The fingers of my right hand found the ring on my left and twisted it nervously.

"To see you dead, of course," she replied. "But we may never find the priest if we kill you, so we are taking you to someone who will help us."

"Help you what?" I cried. "I've told you all I know! I've told you the truth! You are wasting time; I need to find him! He could die!" I pounded on the lid of the box.

"Do you love him?" she asked me.

I froze. "What?"

"Do you love the priest?"

Slowly I laid my hands flat on the top of the box. "I don't know," I whispered softly.

"Maybe you had better figure it out before you find him," she said. I heard faint movements and knew she had moved away.

Did I love him? How could she ask me such a question? I felt strongly for him, yes, even attracted to him physically more than I had ever been attracted to any other man. He was great to be around, romantic and funny. He always did the unexpected.

Love him? Was I capable of love? Were any Kindred? *Yes*, I thought, remembering Brenda and Michael. Kindred could love. But did I love Jason?

I did not really remember what love was like. I knew I felt affection for people, for Antonio most of all, also for my good friends Estrea Moreno and Luke Thomas. I cared about Papa and Brenda although I didn't know either of them well enough to feel genuine affection for them. What I felt for Jason clearly overshadowed what I felt for anyone else and if it was love, I wasn't sure I wanted it.

As I lay waiting the dawn I wouldn't see and it's numbing sleep I ran my mind back to the dream I'd had at Maria's about the second time Jason had saved my life. I smiled as I remembered how suspicious I'd been of his motives at first, that I hadn't really liked him at all. I thought about how protective he'd been toward me and how, almost despite myself, I'd begun to trust him.

As the vehicle continued to move along, I relived the dance we'd shared in San Francisco. I thought of what he had told me of his past at the monastery. It explained so much to me about who Jason really was.

I touched my lips and felt again the kiss he'd given me before he'd sent me to the wine cellar. I regretted more than I could say not making him listen to how much I cared about him. I saw his face wracked with agony as he lay on the altar, the sorcerer standing over him, I heard again the horrible booming voice.

I felt tears begin to run into my hair as I stared into the blackness. *My life for yours*, he had told me. Now I whispered it in the darkness to him, wherever he was. "My life for yours."

"Nothing will stand in my way," I vowed quietly, "Until I see you again and we are both free."

I had known Jason for such a short time, just a few months really, yet it felt like forever. I swore not to rest until he was with me or his killers were dead.

Love? I wondered. Maybe not, but the possibility could not be denied.

The next night when I opened my eyes to see only darkness, I was aware from the start that I was still in the box. The vehicle was moving down what felt like the same bumpy road and I groaned softly; this was not the way to save Jason.

I waited through the night, the ring on my finger my only company. The woman never returned, and an opportunity for escape never came. I resolved to have patience; some time, some where I knew there would come a chance to escape. As sleep claimed me at dawn, I began to dream.

*I was back at the ruins of the monastery and the sun shone high overhead. Flowers danced on the breeze, lightly kissed by bees and butterflies. Birds sang sweetly, and I could see small woodland creatures romping in the sun.*

*Walking toward the ruins, I looked at the flower-covered vines and small saplings growing from cracks between the stones. As I approached the altar, the birds and other creatures began to fall silent.*

*I noticed that the closer I got to the altar the darker the flowers became until, at the foot of the altar, they were all deep crimson. As I looked, I saw that the color was everywhere, staining even the stones and the leaves. The altar itself was covered with the dark substance. Slowly I leaned over and began to lap at the liquid puddled there, cleaning it from the stones.*

*Suddenly I reared back in shock; it was Jason's blood!*

*A lone hawk cried out in the meadow and I spun to the sound. A man stood nearby, his face in shadow. I walked toward him slowly, then stopped when he held up a hand and I realized it was Jason, his face bare of disguises.*

*"Christina," he said, "you must go."*

*"Jason," I whispered, "I came here to help you."*

*"You can't help me now, Christina," he said sadly. "I'm beyond any help you can offer."*

*"I won't accept that," I said strongly, taking a step forward. "Nothing short of final death will keep me from you, I have sworn it."*

*His smile was a near grimace. "I am beyond your reach," he repeated, "I release you from your vow." He began to fade away before my eyes.*

*"No!" I cried. I reached for him but touched nothing. "I will find you! I'll avenge this, I swear it!"*

*"I release you," I heard him say as if from a distance, "You can't help me now."*

*"No!" I screamed wildly.*

*Birds flew from the trees and animals scattered. Even the bees and butterflies seemed to flee in terror. The sky grew dark, large gray clouds covering the sun. The wind began to rise.*

*"No!" I screamed again, "I will find you!"*

*"You will never find him," I heard from behind me above the whipping wind. It was the same booming voice that had called for Jason on that terrible morning.*

*Slowly I turned to face the withered man who had tortured Jason and rage flowed through my veins. I could feel my fangs extend of their own accord. Abruptly, the wind died.*

*"Who are you to tell me what I will never do?" I demanded as I walked toward where the man stood several feet to the left of the altar.*

*His eyes widened, shock running across his features. "I am the one who took him from you," he said as he recovered himself, pleasure in the deed clear in his tone. "I am the one who will destroy him, and you."*

*"Then you are the one who will die," I replied coldly. "I'll find him, or I'll find you. Either way, I'll find satisfaction, I think."*

*He laughed roughly. "Do you think you can fight me this time?" he asked. "Really, Tina. I'll win, I always win." He raised his arms and I felt his magic pull at me, trying to force me toward the altar. I read the surprise on his face when I stepped closer to him instead. Again he raised his arms, and again I fought the pull and stepped closer to him.*

*Then I smiled, showing my extended fangs. He took a step backward, visibly shaken.*

*"I will find him, or I will find you," I repeated sternly. "Either way my vow will be satisfied. Honor shall be avenged. Beware, crone, don't be fool enough to underestimate me again."*

*He spun and with a swirl of his cloak, he was gone.*

*I approached the altar again. I knelt beside it and touched the stains on the stone. So much blood; how could Jason possibly have survived? I had to find him and soon.*

The dream faded and I dreamt no more that day.

# THE HOLDING

Your anchor is up; you've been swept away  
And the greatest of teachers won't hesitate  
To leave you there, by yourself, chained to fate

I Alone - Live

I awoke slowly and clawed my way to consciousness. I dreaded opening my eyes and seeing only darkness before me. It took me a moment to realize I was lying on my side on a cold stone floor.

I opened my eyes a slit and looked cautiously at a stone wall a few feet away. I turned my head a little and looked around to see that I was at the bottom of what looked like a dry stone well about ten feet in diameter. I braced myself on my hands and pushed upward a bit to get a better look. I had to look twice at the walls before I realized there seemed to be beams of light running vertically at two-inch intervals all around the walls.

"Hello," a deep voice called out from above me.

I threw my head back in surprise and looked up. A man looked over the edge of the well perhaps twenty feet above me. He had dark hair and skin, and radiated health the way a professional athlete does.

A woman peeked over the edge at his side. She was pretty, with long brown hair framing her oval face. Their heads made dark areas on the wall where they interrupted the beams. The light didn't seem to hurt them, but I wasn't fooled; I would not go anywhere near the walls as long as those beams were on.

"Hello," I replied, remaining crouched on the floor.

"Who are you?" the woman asked.

I paused, then told her my first name.

"How do you know Jason?" she demanded.

"He's a good friend of mine," I told her. "Who are you?"

"Lena," she said.

I thought quickly. "Her Ladyship Lena Stockton?"

"Yes," she said, surprised. "How do you know me?"

"I spoke with you briefly by phone a few nights ago," I said, rising carefully to my feet. "It's good to meet you."

"When did I speak with you?"

"Tuesday night. We didn't talk for long, but I was supposed to meet you in a small village in Austria." I smiled slightly. "My cell phone cut out before we could talk for very long. You said you would help me find Jason."

"Where is he?" she demanded, her hands gripping the stone edge of the well.

"I don't know," I said gravely, "but if you let me out, perhaps together we can find him."

Their heads disappeared and I could hear the faint murmur of conversation. A few moments later, Lena reappeared. "I will only let you go if you promise not to hurt any of my people."

I could feel the hunger burning within me; it had been nearly a week since I'd fed. I knew there was no need to pretend to be other than what I was, they would have found out soon enough if the werewolves hadn't told them already. "You wouldn't happen to have some sort of blood bank here, would you?" I asked hopefully. "I need sustenance."

She studied me intently. "You will be provided with what you need," she told me after a moment.

"If you give me what I need, I won't hurt anyone here," I promised.

Lena gestured behind her and the beams of light went off. Quickly I scaled the wall using the many hand and footholds available. When I approached the top, the man reached down, lifted me bodily and set me on the floor. He was abnormally strong, and I backed away from him as soon as he let me go. I remembered clearly the strength of werewolves at the village. He smiled at me.

I brushed the dust from my clothing then looked at Lena, who had the valise at her feet. She held the bone in one hand and the unopened envelope in the other.

"Is that mine?" I asked and pointed to the valise. I knew it was.

"Yes," she replied. She placed the bone back into the valise and turned the envelope over in her hands.

"Those things are Jason's," I said as she began to open the envelope. "I don't think he would want us to open them."

"Our friend is in a position where he cannot make decisions right now," said the Garou whom I later learned was named Mikael, "maybe never."

"I prefer not to think that way," I said, angry that this wolf-man would.

"You have to face the possibility that he may be dead," Mikael said not unkindly as Lena read the envelope's contents. His voice carried a light accent I didn't recognize.

"Do I?" I asked, stiff with anger.

Lena gasped and put a hand to her mouth.

"What is it?" I demanded, but she waved me away.

I moved closer and tried to see what she was looking at. All I could tell was that the papers she was holding had Jason's handwriting on them. After a moment, she handed me one of the two sheets.

I read it quickly and took note of the web address across the top and the name Sire Records.

You thought I'd never find it. Talon, does this smell or what?

"Do you have a computer?" I asked Lena. She seemed not to hear me.

I moved to look over her shoulder at the second page. It contained a list of dates and locations along with two song lyrics that seemed vampiric in nature. The dates began in London and ended in Detroit. The last date was only days before Jason and I had left for Europe.

Lena and began I discussing various possibilities.

"Sire Records," I said. "Sounds like a Kindred thing to me."

Lena asked me where Jason and I had been during the dates listed.

I began with the first date. "October 27<sup>th</sup>, I was in a dungeon in Salem." When Lena looked at me strangely, I said, "Yes, a dungeon. On Halloween, Jason was kind enough to rescue me.

"On November first, I flew back to Vegas. I believe Jason returned to San Francisco on the second. On the sixth he called me and asked me to come to 'Frisco the following night. We had dinner together and he told me about the trip to Europe.

"We left that evening, spent the day in Salem and traveled through London to Italy, where we arrived at the monastery on Sunday the ninth."

I told her about the warning Jason had received from the small device and how shaken he'd been at hearing the horrible voice. I said that we had been in tight situations together before, but that I had never seen him scared like that. I told her about the gunshots and the rising wind, the old man and the cloak.

When I told her of Jason on the altar and the withered crone-like man standing over him, she asked me what the mage had looked like. I gave her his description and she seemed to ponder it for a moment, her face pale.

"What does Jason mean to you?" she asked almost casually, her eyes searching mine.

"Jason is a good friend," I replied as I struggled to hide my feelings from her. "What does he mean to you?"

She smiled slightly. "Jason is like a brother to me," she said as she glanced at Mikael. It was quite apparent her feelings for Mikael were quite a bit stronger than that.

I felt the hunger calling inside of me and asked her where I might feed. She glanced at Mikael and gestured me aside.

Lena studied me closely, then pulled her long hair off one side of her neck. She angled her head to give me access to her juggler vein, but she looked wary, almost afraid.

I gazed at the pulse she had revealed and fought to control myself. I closed my eyes and held a hand out to her. When I looked at her again, she seemed confused.

"Your hand, if I may," I said softly. Slowly she placed her hand in mine. "If you don't mind, milady, I'd rather do it this way."

Lena glanced at Mikael and he shrugged before he stepped closer to us. Lena nodded and my canines extended as I cautiously lifted her wrist to my mouth. Tenderly I inserted my teeth into her flesh and began to drink.

Mikael moved to Lena's side, turned her head into his shoulder, and held her gently while I fed. He watched me fiercely while I took only enough blood to control my hunger. I pulled my fangs out slowly and ran my tongue lightly across the twin wounds to close them. Lena turned to me and blinked in surprise at the lack of pain.

*She's been 'kissed' before, I told myself, and not kindly.*

"Are you all right?" Mikael asked her. He supported her and she leaned against his strength.

"Just a little woozy," she replied. Lena studied her wrist, then glanced at me. "Is-is that enough for you?"

I smiled slightly, careful not to reveal my still extended fangs. "It has been a long time since I've fed, but that will hold me over until I can reach a large city. Thank you for your generosity, Lady." I bowed slightly and retracted the canines by sheer force of will.

"Perhaps I should take you hunting," Mikael said. "Would a large animal suit your needs?"

"That would be excellent," I told him, grateful for the offer.

He seemed surprised. "You would feed from an animal?"

"Whatever is available," I replied. "Whatever works best."

Mikael swung a drooping Lena up into his arms. She seemed very frail held in his brute strength. "You need to rest," he told her. "Wait here," he said to me as he carried her through the doorway.

I picked up the valise and opened it. Everything seemed to be there, including the Glock Jason had left inside and its remaining clip. There was no sign of my weapon.

I remembered the clip the Garou had thrown into the box with me and pulled it from my pocket. I studied the bullets for a moment and decided that they must be silver. Why else would the clip have brought such a reaction from werewolves? I loaded the Glock with the silver bullets and put the phosphorous clip in my pocket. I placed the gun in the holster at the small of my back.

I reached past my cellular phone to pull out the palmtop computer and tried to figure out more of its functions. After some playing around, I found a Personal Information Manager, or PIM,



function. It revealed travel information from the time that Jason had flown to Salem in Late October. I smiled as I remembered my relief when I had seen him in the dungeon hallway. I also found the cancelled reservations to the Cayman Islands.

I traced our travel route to the monastery, then found further arrangements for our travel to Austria. There were even notes on the trip that he had promised to take me on when his business in Europe was finished.

My vision swam with a red haze and I blinked at the blood tears filling my eyes. I searched my mind for some way I might have saved Jason from the creature that had tormented him, but could find no avenue I hadn't taken.

Angry with myself, I dashed the red drops from my cheeks. A river of tears wouldn't help Jason now, I had to be strong and piece together what little information I had. I would use Lena, and Mikael, even Antonio and Brenda if I had to in order to find Jason. After all, I knew he would do the same for me.

I was twisting the ring Jason had given me when I heard footsteps approaching and quickly I wiped away the last traces of my tears.

As Mikael led me out of the castle, he asked if I wanted to hunt or if I would prefer he do so. I told him I thought it would be better, faster if he did the hunting. When we cleared the castle grounds Mikael swept his dark hair off his forehead and said, "So how do you know Jason?"

"Graves instructed Jason to protect me," I told him.

"And he did so."

"Yes." I stepped over a fallen log, and said, "He saved me, many times. I owe him a life-boon that I intend to repay."

"Is that it?" Mikael asked and turned to look down at me in the moonlight with his dark probing eyes.

"What do you mean?" In the dark I couldn't read his expression.

"Your kind isn't exactly known for its regard for humans," he replied as he moved off again into the trees.

"And your kind is known for its contempt of Kindred," I bit out.

After we walked a few feet, I said, "I'm sorry. Can we not stereotype one another? Let's get to know each other before making any judgements, okay?"

Mikael glanced back at me. "Fine."

Several minutes later, he said, "Are you going to answer my question?"

"What question?"

"Is gratitude and debt all you feel for Jason?" he replied as we walked deeper into the forest.

I didn't answer for a moment, then said, "Jason is my friend. He has been there for me in every way that I needed him. I refuse to leave him to the likes of that... crone."

Mikael stopped so quickly that I almost ran into him. He turned and looked down into my face. "And that's it?"

I looked away, unable to meet his gaze. "That's it."

"Are you lying to convince me or yourself?" he chuckled.

I backed away as he began to strip off his clothing, a little shocked at his lack of modesty. I couldn't remember ever seeing a naked man before that night. I watched with wonder and not a little fear as he quickly transformed into a large gray wolf and disappeared into the forest.

About forty-five minutes later, after much soul searching and pacing on my part, I could hear a large animal returning through the trees. As it came into view, I could see it was a gigantic creature, nearly seven feet tall and very muscular. It wasn't really human or beast, but rather a mixture of both.

It had a large buck across one shoulder that it threw to the ground at my feet. It took the horns of the buck and twisted the neck to give me access. My hunger quickly overcame my fear of the beast. I knelt beside them and eyed the buck greedily.

"Does the village need food?" I asked as I touched the deer's neck gently. I felt the pin pricks of my fangs against my lips.

"The meat will not go to waste," it growled in reply.

I bent and slowly pierced the buck's hide with my teeth. I drank deeply and felt the life force drain from the creature. I mourned for the animal and knew that it gave its life for mine.

When the beast was dead and I was full, I sat up, backed slightly away from Mikael, and wiped the blood from my lips. My teeth retracted easily this time as I turned to avoid the sight of the wolf-man gutting the buck.

When he was done, the beast that was Mikael lifted the carcass to his shoulder and started toward the village. I scooped up his clothing and followed at a slight distance.

When we reached the edge of the village, the beast put down his burden. Again I watched Mikael transform, this time back into a human. I handed Mikael his clothing and averted my eyes while he dressed. When he was done, he grabbed the buck by the horns and balanced it along his back, the hindquarters dragging on the ground.

Mikael led me to a cottage and bade me enter. He told me I would be safe within, and that I should rest. I went inside and threw the simple bolt home.

Before I succumbed to the inevitable daytime rest, I performed the simple ceremony Antonio had taught me to keep out the sunlight. I shook my head in disgust that I had forgotten about it in the car. Then I laid my head down on Mikael's cot and waited restlessly for sunrise.

# CLUES

What the heff

What is it you think you're gonna find?

The Struggle Within - Metallica

When I awoke the next evening, I pumped water into the sink and washed myself as best I could. The nights of hard travel and the time in the coffin had left me feeling stale and used. Then I left the cabin and made my way to the castle that dominated the hillside. The waxing moon shone brightly, lighting my way.

A servant answered the door and took my name before going off. When he returned, he led me down a corridor to a study where Lena was using a telephone. She seemed to be talking to a friend, and I looked around the book-lined study, fingering my ring while I waited for her to finish.

Then something she said caught my attention; she was asking the person to arrange a meeting with the pop star, Madelyn. I looked at Lena and noticed for the first time that she was looking at what seemed to be a roll of toilet paper with writing on it.

"Madelyn?" I asked when she hung up.

"Yes," Lena replied. "We checked the web site on the paper and the dates we found are for her world tour. All dates past November fifth have been cancelled."

"What do you have there?" I asked, gesturing toward the roll in her hands.

She seemed reluctant to reply, then said, "It was a gift."

"May I see?" After a moment's hesitation, she handed it to me.

The roll was almost empty, and each remaining square had a phrase written on it in lipstick. Some squares even had simple pictures.

"'In a city where Angels have fallen,'" I read. "Los Angeles?" Lena shrugged. "'A prince named for the homes of the dead.'" The phrase was accompanied by sketchings of tombstones.

"Graves?" Lena asked.

"It seems likely," I replied. I had heard a rumor that Graves was prince of Los Angeles.

"What is a prince?"

"A Kindred who rules a city." I continued unrolling the paper. "'Rabble wanting to be royalty'. Brujah, looks like." Their clan symbol lay above the word Rabble. "'A childe rising up against a sire,'" I read glancing at the frowning face scribbled next to the words.

"Brujah?" Lena queried. "Sire?"

"Brujah are a bad bunch of Kindred, mean and rough. Rabble," I told her. "A sire is kind of like a parent vampire, he creates the childe."

Lena nodded thoughtfully.

"'Czar destroying the worst of Two Claws.' Two Claws?" I shrugged, then read on. "'Find a Siren, Save a Goddess.'"

"The Siren could be Madelyn," Lena offered.

"But who is the Goddess?"

"We don't know," she said. "Maybe Graves would help us to find Jason."

"Perhaps that would be our best course of action right now," I replied thoughtfully as Mikael came into the room.

"Christina," he said, looking at me very intently, his voice hard, "I would appreciate it if you would reload your weapon with slightly different ammunition."

I returned his look for a long moment and my body stiffened in preparation for a fight I knew I couldn't possibly win. "You must understand my unease and misgivings," I told him. "Your people have not been kind to me."

"That is true," he admitted, "but I am the only one of my people here." He crossed his large arms across his broad chest.

Casting a glance between Mikael and Lena, I knew that he was right, he had been more than kind to me. I rolled the toilet paper back up and handed it to Lena. She stiffened as I drew my gun, then relaxed a bit when I snapped the clip out. I put the clip in my pocket and took out the phosphorous loaded clip. I loaded the gun with a click and returned the weapon to its holster.

Mikael relaxed his stance and Lena smiled up at him.

I gestured toward the valise where it lay on the table. "May I?"

"Of course," Lena replied, sliding it toward me.

I pulled out the palmtop and activated the PIM. While waiting for it to load, I asked, "May I use the phone?" She agreed.

Quickly I dialed Jason's cell phone number from memory and waited for the connection.

"*Da*," a voice answered.

"Hello?" I asked, confused. I knew I'd dialed the right number.

The man mumbled something in what I took to be Russian.

"Do you speak English?" I questioned him as I heard yelling in the background.

"*Dos svedanya*," he replied pleasantly a moment later, then hung up.

I held the phone away from my face, staring at it.

"What is it? Lena asked.

"I just called Jason's number," I replied, putting the phone down. "I got some guy speaking Russian, then he hung up on me."

"Tell me what he said," she urged.

I repeated the short conversation. "Do you know Russian?"

"Yes."

"Perhaps if you call back, you may get somewhere," I said, watching her face.

She seemed hesitant and glanced at Mikael, who shrugged. She nodded at me slowly, then activated the speakerphone before hitting the redial button.

"Da," the man said again when he answered.

I couldn't follow the conversation as the only Russian I'd ever heard was in the movies. I caught snatches, like 'Nikoli Petrovich' and 'Presidente,' but none of it made sense. Then the man spoke Lena's name and she looked like she'd been slapped. Mikael picked up the receiver and barked a few sentences into it before he slammed it down. He immediately picked it back up and dialed a number.

"Gregory, are your guests still there?" he asked. "Good. Tell them to get a hold of our brothers and sisters. Yes, a family reunion. At my house. Right away. Yes. Thank you." Slowly he replaced the receiver in its cradle.

Lena still sat in shock. Mikael went to her, gathering her into his arms.

"What have I done?" she whispered, crying softly.

"What's going on?" I demanded.

"It will be alright," Mikael told Lena, ignoring me. "Nothing will happen to the village. We'll protect it. But you must leave, tonight."

"What have I done?" she said again, tears streaming down her face.

"Tell me what's going on!" I demanded. "What happened?"

"Jason's phone is in Russia," Mikael told me as he held Lena. "He is going by the name of Nickoli Petrovich. The man said they have him and that they knew who Lena is. They will be coming."

"And you sent for your family to protect the village?" I asked softly.

"Yes, but you both must leave, now," Mikael said urgently. "My tribe will kill you for bringing this trouble here and Lena must be taken out of danger. You will need to get some supplies," Mikael added. "I will make arrangements for your travel."

Lena seemed to be pulling herself together. "We have to go to Los Angeles," she said, "I have to speak to Graves." Mikael stiffened a little, but did not release her.

"Do you have a car," I asked, "or motorcycles?" They looked at me like I was insane. "Horses?" I whispered.

They both nodded.

"Horses don't like me," I told them softly, reminding them of my nature. Animals only tolerated the rare Kindred who weren't of the Gangrel, Nosferatu or Ravnos bloodline.

Mikael gave me a disgusted look. "I'll arrange for a cart. It might be better for Lena anyway." He kissed her temple softly.

"Maybe we should take the box, if it is still here," I said with a suppressed shudder. "We may be able to travel faster if I'm in cargo. I also need to make a few more phone calls."

"You have a point about the box," Lena said, rising and leading the way out of the room. I grabbed the valise and stuffed the computer inside of it as I followed.

"One thing about the box," I said, "I want it to latch from the inside, no nailing it shut this time. You can probably understand my reluctance to get back inside without being able to get out on my own."

"Yes," Mikael replied, "I'll grab my tools." With a last kiss to Lena, he left to make the necessary arrangements.

Lena opened a door and we entered a storage room full of electronic equipment. The cellular phones that sat on one shelf caught my eye.

"These are identical to mine," I commented, reaching for spare batteries.

"Grab an extra phone and take several spare batteries," she told me. She grabbed a few other items, then said, "I'm going to run upstairs and grab a change of clothing. Do you need anything?"

"If you have anything that fits," I replied. Lena was a bit shorter than I was. "My luggage is still at the monastery."

"Wait for me by the front door," she said as we were leaving the storage room, "I'll be just a minute."

Mikael was coming around the castle entrance in a horse pulled cart when Lena and I came outside. The bright moon illuminated him and the driver beside him, and revealed the pine box in the back. Lena and I climbed in beside it before it stopped fully, and Mikael motioned the driver on as he joined us. He opened his toolbox and began fashioning an interior latch and hinges.

As we traveled, I replaced the battery pack in my cell phone with a fresh one, then used the palmtop to recall the hotel phone numbers Jason had listed for the remainder of our trip. No one

had seen Jason, or rather 'Philippe,' and our rooms at each hotel on the itinerary had remained unused.

I also called the travel agent he had listed, but she had not heard from him. She promised to call me right away if she did. Then I tried to call Antonio, but the time difference made it several hours before sunset on the West Coast. I decided to try the Salem prince's house.

"Hello?" a female voice responded to my ring.

"Hello," I replied, "My name is Christina Strong. It is very urgent that I speak with Brenda Thompson right away."

"If you will hold a moment, I will get her for you," she said pleasantly.

"Please hurry," I urged, "I am on a cellular phone calling from overseas."

After a few moments, Brenda came on the line. "Christina," she said, "what can I do for you?"

"I really hate to impose on you, but I really need your help," I told her. "I need to get a message to Antonio but I'm in Eastern Europe and the time difference is making it difficult."

"I understand," she replied.

"Please tell him that I believe Graves is in danger and Jason—'Martin' has been abducted."

"'Martin?'" Brenda asked. "The human that was here with you?"

"Yes, I believe he is in great danger." Despite my efforts to calm myself, my voice shook slightly.

"I see." The tone of her voice made me think that she probably did.

"Also, I will be coming back to the States in a day or so, and I would appreciate you making travel arrangements for us; one human, Lena Stockton, and one box. We need the fastest possible route to Los Angeles from Austria."

"I can do that for you, no problem," she assured me.

"Can you call me when you have the arrangements made?" I asked.

"I will, Christina," she told me. "Keep safe."

"Thank you so much for your help, Brenda," I said. "I owe you." Then I rang off.

"Who was that," Lena asked.

"My sister."

"You have a sister?"

"A sister in the sense that we share a sire," I replied. "She will be making our flight arrangements and calling me with the details. She will also be contacting Antonio, who will in turn warn Graves."

"Who is Antonio?" she asked.

"My sire. Brenda's sire," I said. "He is a good man, he will help us."

"He is not a man," Mikael interjected roughly as he sat back, having installed the interior latch on the box.

"Lena, could you teach me Russian?" I inquired softly, thinking of the phone call as the cart swayed on the rough road. She agreed and began my instruction.

In the next village, Mikael took his leave of us to return to the castle and protect the village. Lena and I got on the Euro Rail and at the first stop I got into the box as morning was nearly upon us.

The following evening Brenda phoned me. After giving me our flight information to New York, she said, "Michael has sent his Leer and I will have it waiting for you in New York."

"That was nice of him," I replied. "Is he still with Antonio?"

"Yes," she said. "They are both in LA Apparently there is some trouble brewing, but you knew that, didn't you?"

"I had some idea," I told her. "Brenda, when you send the Leer, could you see that there are supplies aboard? I won't have time to stop and eat."

She agreed. "One more thing, there seems to be something more going on with Graves. Michael says he hears stories about where Graves has been, and it doesn't match up with where he actually sees him."

"Really?" I asked. What could that mean? "Anything else?" When she demurred, I inquired how her studies were going.

"Good," she said. "I am learning a lot here. Micky is showing me around town and I'm getting on well. I'm glad Antonio agreed to let me train here."

"It's a wonderful opportunity for you, as I'm sure you know," I replied, for a moment mildly jealous of her. Salem has traditionally been a stronghold of the Tremere Clan, with a very advanced Chantry.

"Look," she added just before we rang off, "if I can do anything for you, call me."

"I will."

"I hope you find 'Martín' soon," she said.

The gleam of the diamond on my engagement ring caught my eye. "So do I."

I climbed back into the box before we left Heathrow Airport, and that day I dreamed of the night that I had rediscovered my father, the same night I had realized Jason was human. He had been there by my side, keeping me safe and convincing me not to harm Papa.

*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 loosing. 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 Jason 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.

I woke as Michael's Leer was preparing to land in LA, still remembering the feel of arms around me, the taste blood lingering in my mouth.

# INTRIGUE

Oh now feel it comin' back again  
Like a roffin' thunder chasing the wind  
Lightning Crashes - Live

Before landing in Los Angeles, I took a moment to wake Lena and changed into clothing that Brenda had thoughtfully provided for me. I also fed from blood bags, making sure that Lena knew what I was doing but didn't watch.

Michael had a limousine waiting for us and it took us to a very exclusive restaurant in the hills. The waiter showed us to a table in the corner set for four. I watched Lena's eyes cover the room expectantly, then glanced around myself. I spotted a few Kindred in the crowd, but no one I knew, and none tried to catch my attention.

I kept my hands in my lap and ran my fingers along the vine design of the ring while Lena sipped at her drink. We waited. About fifteen minutes later, I spotted Michael and Antonio working their way toward us. I had to look twice to recognize Antonio—he was wearing an Armani suit similar to Michael's. *Michael must be influencing him greatly*, I thought.

As they sat down, I greeted Antonio, then added, "New tailor?"

He smiled. "You like, no?"

"Yes," I greeted Michael and introduced Lena.

Michael asked what he could do for us.

"Lena and I need to meet with Madelyn," I told him.

"Good luck," said Antonio. "You probably won't get any further than the police have in getting to her."

"What?"

"Haven't you heard?" Michael asked. When Lena and I shook our heads, he said, "She's been accused of murder. The ghoul who does the day for her is missing, and Madelyn has gone into hiding. Only the prince and the primogen know where she is."

"We have to see her," I said leaning forward.

Antonio patted my hand. "We will see what we can do. Now what is this I hear about 'Martín' missing?"

I looked down into my drink, the ice cubes shining like a mortal's unshed tears. "We were travelling in Italy when some... thing captured him. We have reason to believe he is in Russia and in great danger." I took a deep breath, trying to control my emotions. Of course Antonio did not miss my action. "Tell me, have the Brujah been acting up here in LA?"

"Yes," said Michael, surprised I asked. "How did you know? Graves has been working overtime trying to get the city back under control. And there is a primogen missing."

I glanced at Lena. "Which one?"

"The Tremere," growled Antonio, his face grim.

"We must see Graves," I said, almost to myself.

Lena spoke up for the first time. "Christina, have you met Talon?"

"Talon?" Why would she change the subject? "Who is he?"

"Talon Graves," she said simply.

I looked at her for a moment, realizing that I had never heard Graves' first name before. I turned to Michael. "Have you heard anything more about Graves being in more than one place at the same time?"

"No," he replied, "only what I told Brenda."

"What are you thinking?" asked Lena.

"The worst of Two Claws." I whispered.

She sat back, a worried look on her face. "We must see him right away!"

Michael picked up his drink. "I'm sorry, Lady Stockton, mortals are not allowed to see the prince."

"But I must see Graves," she protested.

I reached over and touched her hand. "I'll try to arrange something. Why don't you check into our hotel? I will call you to keep you informed of what is going on."

Lena searched my face for a moment, then glanced at Michael and agreed. We all rose and left the restaurant, getting into the limousine that was parked outside. When we reached the hotel to drop Lena off, Antonio handed me a large box from the trunk and asked me to change.

I went up to our suite with Lena and took a quick glance around, then went into the bedroom I would stay in. I undressed and opened the box, standing there for a moment, stunned. I pulled the black sequined dress out of the box and held it to the light.

The dress was very formal, with spaghetti straps leading to a fairly modest neckline. Was it the father in Antonio showing? The dress was more than floor length as I held it up to my body and I hoped there would be a pair of very high heels in the box. I checked to be sure and there they were, sequined to match the dress. I also found black lingerie designed to set a man's eyes on fire. Michael's influence again?

Quickly I began to dress and, of course, everything fit beautifully. The bodice was snug but not tight, the skirt full enough not to restrict my movements. The shoes also fit well and since they had a fashionably wedged heel I didn't feel awkward walking in them.

Looking in the box one last time I found a short jacket, which I slipped on, and a sequined purse. Closer inspection of the purse showed the sequins were in a lightning bolt pattern. A glance in the mirror revealed that the sequins on the dress and jacket had an identical pattern.

I slipped my cell phone and gun into the purse, along with lipstick and several hundred dollars. I applied a light coat of makeup and fluffed my hair. On my way out the door, I told Lena I would call her as soon as I knew anything.

As I rejoined the men, Antonio complimented me on my appearance. I thanked him and Michael for the dress and its accessories. On the way to the Coliseum, Antonio told me I would have to be presented to the prince as soon as we arrived.

"How have you been since Salem, Christina?" Antonio asked.

"Better," I said, "but now there is this thing with 'Martin.'" On my left hand, the weight of the ring on my hand reminded me of my obligation to find Jason.

Antonio and Michael exchanged glances, almost as if they were speaking to each other, and Antonio nodded. He turned back to me. "Is your father well?"

"I believe so," I replied, "I haven't spoken to him for nearly a week. He wants me to come home for Thanksgiving, but I'm not sure I'll make it. Perhaps Christmas."

We pulled up to the doors of the Coliseum. Michael and Antonio again looked at each other, and I smiled slightly as I stepped out of the limousine. *Looks like Antonio has been sharing his tricks with others,* I thought to myself.

Two Kindred in tuxedos greeted us at the door. They seemed very uncomfortable in their clothing and had the look of Gangrel to them. As we entered, I could see open doors ahead of us in the lobby, with many Kindred inside. We approached those doors and I could see that the entire floor area of the Coliseum was decorated for a formal ball. Kindred were everywhere, some in suits and ties or simple dresses, but most in tuxedos and evening gowns. Many appeared to be security. There were no humans in the room.

As soon as we entered, several Tremere caught sight of Antonio and hurried over. They were very anxious to speak with him alone on a 'clan matter.'

"Michael has been accepted into my home as if he were my own," Antonio stated bluntly. "Christina is my childe. Anything you need to say you may say before them."

After a quick glance at Michael and me, the tall dark Kindred spoke. "As you know, sir, our Primogen has been missing for four nights. We entered his apartment earlier this evening to discover that his personal belongings are gone, along with several historical tomes."

"The prince has called a council meeting this evening," said the shorter blond Tremere. "With Van Able gone, we have no one to represent us."

"I will sit on the council for the Tremere," Antonio replied. The two Kindred looked relieved.

Something they had said sparked my interest. "The primogen took only his own belongings?"

"We didn't go through his apartment," the tall one said, "only enough to determine little was missing but what belonged to him."

"The books he took, were they of importance?" I inquired.

"No," the blonde replied. "They were from the general library, not even from the reserved library that we keep our ancient texts in."

"Interesting," I murmured.

"We are on our way to present Christina to the prince," Michael said. "We shouldn't keep him waiting."

"Of course not," the blonde said, then nodded to Antonio. "Thank you, sir, for your assistance to the Los Angeles Tremere."

"I will do what I can," Antonio replied.

As we continued across the floor, many Kindred acknowledged the men I was with, though only one approached. She was a very beautiful woman in a stunning evening gown.

"Belinda," Michael said, greeting her. "You know Antonio?"

"Yes, I do," she purred, holding out a hand which Antonio brought to his lips.

"Charmed, madam," he said. "Please allow me to introduce my childe, Christina."

"Pleased to meet you, ma'am," I said, dropping a slight curtsey and nodding my head.

"And I you," she said coolly, then turned to Michael.

"We're on our way up to present Christina to the prince," Michael told her.

"Well, make sure to stop and see me when you are done," Belinda said, her voice sultry, her hand running down Michael's arm.

"I wouldn't think of not doing so," he replied gallantly, then began walking toward the elevator. When we reached it, another Gangrel pair of guards stopped us.

Michael rose to his full height. "We have business with the prince. He is expecting us."

One of the guards stepped a few feet away and used a small radio to call upstairs. A moment later he returned and waved us through. We entered the elevator to find another guard waiting inside. He pushed a button marked 'Observation Deck' and the doors slid closed.

We were silent as the elevator rose, but I noticed that Michael and Antonio seemed to be having another silent conversation. To cover their behavior, I smiled warmly at the guard and was rewarded by a near leer before he looked up at the elevator display.

When the doors opened, we stepped into the T-junction of two hallways. There were two guards waiting on either side of the doors, one male, the other female, both with semi-automatic weapons. The male had his back to us, but something in his stance looked familiar to me. When he turned to motion us down the hall, I recognized him.

"The last door is where the prince awaits you." He hesitated for a moment, looking at me, then said, "Christina?"

"Luke," I replied warmly, holding out my hand to him.

He took my hand and pulled me into his arms. I returned the embrace, for a moment enjoying the feel of his arms around me.

Before I'd met Jason, Luke, Estrea and I had been an inseparable trio. We would meet in Vegas at least once a week and go out gambling, or dancing, or hunting. The three of us had depended on each other and never once doubted our friendship.

At some point I had realized that Luke wanted more from me, but at the time I didn't know how to give it to him. Luke was a wonderful friend and I'd spoken to Estrea only the week before we'd gone to San Francisco about him. She'd recommended taking things one step at a time and letting nature take its course.

Then Jason had literally burst into my life and changed everything. Estrea had disappeared and Luke, after seeing me with Jason, had stopped coming to Vegas. Only now did I think about how that must have hurt him.

As I stepped back, I admired Luke's good looks. His brown eyes shone with affection and I saw that his long hair was tied back with a leather thong to fall halfway down his back.

"It is so good to see you again," I told him honestly. "You look good in a tux. How have you been?" A picture flashed through my mind of Luke as he'd looked at the church in San Francisco, his hair loose about his shoulders, his gun drawn.

He smiled down at me tenderly, still holding my hand. "I've been good. Things are kind of nuts here lately, but I'm doing alright."

From the corner of my eye, I could see my companions waiting none too patiently for me. "Perhaps you could fill me in a little later?"

"Yes," he said, releasing me.

As I turned and let the others lead the way down the corridor, I could feel Luke's eyes on me as we walked away. Again I remembered our closeness in Las Vegas, but knew that now was not the time to travel down that particular memory lane; I was about to meet LA's prince.

Antonio gave our names to the guard standing outside the double doors at the end of the hall. The Gangrel opened the doors and announced us grandly.

The prince sat on a large, intricate Native American rug in the center of the room. He was dressed in elaborately beaded buckskin and was obviously Native American by birth. A woman knelt by his side wearing a similar outfit. Several other Kindred were scattered about the room dressed in formal evening attire.

Michael walked forward and addressed the prince, bowing low. Antonio followed and did likewise.

When Antonio straightened, he turned and gestured me forward. "My prince, I would like to present my child Christina Strong, of the Clan Tremere. She would like your permission to reside in your city for a time, and has agreed to uphold your laws and the Masquerade."

While Antonio spoke, I grasped my skirt and gave the Prince a low curtsy. I waited for him to tell me to rise before I did so.

"You have made a fine choice, Antonio," the Prince said in a deep gravelly voice. "She has my permission to remain in Los Angeles. Now, Christina, could you wait in the hallway while I speak to your escorts? We have business to discuss."

"Of course, sire," I replied and took one last look around the room. I nearly stumbled when I noticed Madelyn sitting by the wall, however I was able to regain my balance and continue out the door.

I walked down the hallway toward Luke, admiring his strong jaw and dark eyes as I did so. I also noted again that while the tuxedo he had on did his figure more justice than the jeans and tee shirt he normally wore, he didn't look comfortable in it.

"What's been up?" I asked as I stood beside him.

Luke glanced toward his companion. "Things have been real shaky lately. The whole city is in turmoil. I suppose you heard about the murder?"

I nodded.

"A city councilman, murdered like that in public. Hell, I wouldn't be surprised if the damned Inquisition crawled up our butts after that one." He shook his head. "And they should be bringing up the murderer of Madelyn's ghoul soon."

I lowered my voice. "Do you know anything about a Brujah that wants to be prince?"

"They all want trouble, but one that wants the crown?" He shook his head. "Why?"

"Just trying to follow up on some information I came across," I replied. "How about a Countess, is there one in town?"

"I don't know of one. Why do you want to find a Countess?"

"She's lost her mineral," I said cryptically.

"What?"

I shook my head. "Never mind, it's complicated." I hesitated, glancing at the other guard. "What do you know about two Talon Graves?"

"I met the other one once," he said, glancing down the hallway. "Saved me and Estrea both. How he got on that plane I'd like to know."

"So there are two," I murmured thoughtfully. "'Two Claws.'"

"Yeah." He looked at me closely. "What are you into? You seem kinda edgy."

"Remember 'Martín?'" At his blank look, I added, "'August?'" He nodded. "He and I were travelling together in Europe when we were separated. I believe he is being held against his will in Russia."

"Russia?"

"I mean to find him, and quickly, or I will not be happy," I said firmly.

Luke shuddered deliberately. "A 'Spooky-boo' pissed. Not something I want to see."

"It's not somewhere I want to be," I told him, "but I'll find him alive or those who hold him will not be."

I glanced back at the female standing nearby, then whispered, "Have you seen Estrea lately?"

"Not in a while, she never came back after San Francisco."

"Did she go back to Vegas?" I wondered aloud.

"I don't know." He looked down the halls again, still alert to any possible trouble. "How's things going with your father?"

I glanced away and shrugged. "Fine, I guess. He wants me to be something I'm not and I have a hard time with that."

He nodded. "He wants you to be his little girl again."

"Yes, and he has trouble dealing with the fact his 'little girl' is now a monster."

"All fathers have to face the fact that their little girls grow up, change," he told me not unkindly.

"But not all girls grow up to live forever and drink blood." I chuckled softly. "I'm sure we'll work through it, but it will take time."

The elevator began to whine behind us and Luke took up more of a military stance, the barrel of his weapon coming up. The doors opened and a tall blond man stepped out who looked like a member of Hell's Angels. His attitude matched his attire of leather and chains. He looked around arrogantly, and I could see Luke bristle. He did not like this Brujah, whoever he was.

I noticed movement down the corridor about the same time everyone else did. Four large male Gangrels were leading a larger Kindred toward us from the right. The prisoner stood about 6'4", with blonde hair and a body that most mortal men would die for. He had obviously been a bodybuilder before his embrace. He did not look pleased as the group stopped about twenty feet from us.

The biker Brujah looked condescendingly at the muscle bound Kindred, then glanced at me. "Are you new in town, or just here for the barbecue?"

I looked down the hall. "I take it that is the accused?"

He nodded. "Should make a fine fire."

"I thought this was America, aren't people supposed to be innocent until proven guilty?" I met the Brujah's gaze without hesitation.

"Many scumbags walk because hard evidence can't be found. I say we burn him on what we got and good riddance. Beside, we're not exactly 'people' now, are we?" He looked at me closer, then laughed harshly. "Seen your primogen lately? Oh, I forgot, you Tremere can't keep track of your own."

"Not my town," I told him calmly, then gave him a cool smile. "Besides, I hear there are a few good clan members in town quite capable of taking his place."

"Yeah," he agreed reluctantly, then grinned. "There could be some changes tonight at the council meeting." With that the biker moved toward the prince's sanctum. Luke stepped in front of him, blocking the way.

"The prince is not ready for the council members just yet, David," Luke said, iron behind his soft spoken words. "It shouldn't be too much longer."

David, the Brujah, backed away stretching his muscles. "Yeah, probably still smoking his fuckin' peace pipe," he said contemptuously. Then he laughed. "Yep, should be some changes tonight!"

David spun and walked toward where the bodybuilder and his guards stood. I heightened my senses, straining to overhear their conversation. I couldn't make out everything they said as most of it was in whispers, but I could tell David was trying to antagonize the young vampire. Strangely, the guards backed away and allowed David to have his fun.

"Did she taste good?" David taunted, "Nearly as good as Madelyn? Not that you'll ever know."

"Fuck you," the man replied.

David laughed and said something I didn't catch. The muscle bound Kindred visibly restrained himself, then looked away.

I turned to Luke and whispered very softly, "I think we've found the Rabble who would be prince."

Luke immediately put a finger to his lips and gestured toward the female standing on the other side of the elevator doors. As David walked back toward us, those doors slid open.

A dark haired Kindred seeming to be in his mid thirties stepped out dressed in a 1930's style pinstriped suit. He flicked the cigarette he was smoking to the ground at David's feet as he approached.

"Put that out for me, boy," the newcomer said dismissively.

"Don't tempt fate," David growled, ignoring the cigarette smoldering at his feet.

"I wouldn't dream of it," the other Kindred said in an accent that could only be from the south side of Chicago. "Last time I tempted fate, look what happened." He threw his arms wide, then pulled out a silver cigarette case and drew one out to smoke. He took a book of matches from his pocket and lit the cigarette with one, flinging the match beside the butt at David's feet.

Then he looked at Luke, snapping his fingers. "Don't I know you, boy? Yes, I do. Luke, right?"

"That's right, Vinney," Luke replied. "How ya doin'?"

"Just fine," Vinney said. "Lookin' for new deals. I'm sick to death of this city, all the tension."

Luke smiled. "Maybe we should find a new city."

"Yeah, that's it," Vinney replied. "Ya know, California is gonna fall off soon anyways. We should buy land in Utah, and then we'll have ocean front property. Open a few casinos, make some money, it could be like the old days!"

"Yeah, Vinney, sounds good," Luke told him.

"Know any Ventrue that could make it happen?"

"I know one who might be able to."

"Good, good." Then Vinney seemed to see the prisoner for the first time and walked down the hall toward him.

I turned to see David standing close to the female guard and talking to her. She was watching him closely as he spoke. With my senses still peaked I could detect a glow of love around her. *She's in love with him*, I thought to myself. David's aura was harder to read, with shifting colors and patterns. I got the impression he was very vindictive.

"I didn't kill her," I heard the bodybuilder protest, "I was attacked and when I woke up she was dead."

Vinney flicked the ash from his cigarette. "Funny how there was no sign of a struggle when the prince's people arrived. Pity you didn't see who attacked you."

"I did see him, we fought for some time," the prisoner replied. "I would know him if I saw him again."

Just then, Michael and Antonio stepped out of the prince's chambers. They came down the hall toward me, looking closely at David.

"Look," David growled, "its Dumb and Dumber."

Antonio walked up to close David, sniffing the air.

"That smell," Michael drawled to David, "is urine on your front porch. There's a bigger dog in town."

David merely smiled as if he knew something Michael didn't.

"I'll be sitting in on the council meeting," Antonio said loudly. Then softer, he said to me, "You go with Michael."



I nodded and asked Luke if we could talk more a little later. He agreed and I pushed the elevator button. When the doors opened Michael and I stepped inside.

# A HELPING HAND

I'm your eyes while you're away  
I'm your pain while you repay  
Sad But True - Metallica

I looked around the interior of the elevator, noting the guard was the same one that had seen us up. It seemed like I noticed everything in the tiny room, as I hadn't yet relaxed my senses.

About half way down to the main floor, the elevator ground to a stop as it lost power. Michael put a hand on my shoulder and pushed me behind him and into the corner. I could feel more than hear him pull his gun as I put a hand inside my purse to switch the safety off on Jason's Glock.

Suddenly I felt a hand cover mine inside my purse and I quickly switched the safety back on. Then the hand, withered and twisted, pulled mine from the bag. I could feel another hand place something, a piece of paper maybe, in my palm, then both hands departed. I put my hand back in my purse as the lights came on again and we moved downward again.

I looked around intently. The guard was in the opposite corner from Michael and I, his gun drawn. Michael stood in front of me where he slowly holstered his weapon. No one else was in the elevator.

I looked up to the trap door. The latch, while closed, was in a slightly different position. I smiled grimly.

As Michael and I left the elevator, I told him I needed to powder my nose. He asked one of the guards for directions to the private areas. The guard gave them to us, also informing us there were rooms we could feed in if the need arose. I told Michael I would catch up to him a little later.

As I walked across the floor, I began identifying members of one clan here, another there. Tremere, Ventrue, Malkavian, Toreador, Brujah, Gangrel; every Camarilla clan seemed to be in attendance. A few I couldn't pinpoint the clan on, and I assumed most were Nosferatu using their Obfuscate abilities to appear normal. Nosferatu generally are hideously deformed.

I walked through a door and down a deserted hallway, still alert to everything around me. I found an empty room and surveyed it quickly for any scanning devices or cameras, but saw none. I opened my purse and looked inside.

I unfolded the paper while it was still in my purse and a key lay inside – an ordinary house key as far as I could tell. I moved the key and read 'Be careful, stick to the shadows.' I pulled the paper from my purse and turned it over. Across the words 'Best Tasting Popcorn' was written an address. I tucked the key back into the note and placed both between my breasts for safekeeping. Then I powdered my nose and touched up my lipstick before leaving the room.

As I started down the hall, I heard Luke call my name. I turned in his direction and we met outside the room I'd been in. He took my hand and led me back inside.

"What's going on?" he demanded, "No bullshit."

I pulled my hand slowly from his and warned him that it might take a few minutes to explain. When he nodded, I began twisting the ring around my finger. "I was travelling through Italy with 'Martín' and we were visiting the place he was raised when he was taken prisoner by some... thing."

"Thing? Kindred?" Luke glanced at my hands, but didn't comment on the ring.

"No, I don't think so. Mage perhaps. He was out in the sunlight. Of course, so was I—"

Luke's eyes widened.

"—but that had to do with the cloak. I was led away by some Italian guy, and then I couldn't find my way back to the monastery. And I got lost and ran into werewolves—"

"Garou?"

"Yes, and it was hairy, if you'll pardon the pun. Then I ended up with Lena and we found out that 'Martín' is being held in Russia."

"He doesn't seem the type to be held for long, babe," Luke said thoughtfully. He almost always called me 'babe' unless he was being very serious or something was wrong.

"The last time I saw him he was spread eagle on an altar, magical bonds holding him down while he screamed in agony," I told him, and there was agony in my voice as well. Blood tears welled in my eyes and I blinked them away ruthlessly. I didn't want to cry in front of Luke but he must have seen my tears. He put a hand on my shoulder to comfort me. After a moment, I turned and walked a few feet away to continue my story.

I told him about the toilet paper clues. He agreed that first two clues pointed towards LA and Graves. We also agreed that the Brujah it referred to was probably David.

"A childe rising up against a Sire," Luke murmured. "Could that be the Gangrel primogen rising up against the prince? He's very tight with the Brujah, in fact, the primogen just dismissed every Gangrel from the security team that did not support the Brujah."

"Very interesting," I replied.

We discussed the other clues, but could come up with nothing substantial.

"Lena and I thought if we could get to Madelyn, she may be the siren. It was her tour that Jason had been tracking. She may know what some of the clues mean." I put a hand to my temple. "I have to find him, Luke. He saved my life so many times, I can't let him die like this."

Luke looked at me closely. "If you want, I'll help you. I'd like to get away for a while anyway, this town is going down fast."

"Luke," I said suddenly, "do you think David might be planning something for tonight?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, he sounded as if changes were going to be made tonight, big changes. And they dismissed the guards that don't like the Brujah..." I glanced at my watch. "Let's find Michael, he may be able to put a stop to it."

We went out onto the main floor and after a few minutes, we found Michael in a group of Ventrue, Michael's clan. We joined them after Michael motioned us forward.

He introduced us around, and while Luke was talking to one of them about ocean front property in Utah, I placed a hand lightly on Michael's arm.

"May I speak with you for a moment?"

He excused us and we stepped aside. I explained everything Luke and I had discussed regarding the clues on the toilet paper, then I told him how the primogen had selectively dismissed some of the guards. Michael's head went up at that and he looked toward the Observation Deck for a long moment.

"If something goes on up there, I'll know it," he told me. "But there is no point in being unprepared. And Antonio is in that council meeting."

"He is but one against many," I implored. "I don't want anything to happen to him."

"I will prepare safeguards," Michael replied, gesturing to a large Ventrue who was smoking a cigar.

"Yeah, Boss," the big guy said as he joined us.

Michael slapped the man on the shoulder in greeting. "I told you not to call me that in public, Bob."

Bob was chagrined. "Oh, yeah, sorry. What can I do ya for?"

"I need you to get some of our people together and go up to the top floor. Wait for my signal, there may be trouble tonight. And stay out of sight."

"Sure boss, I mean Michael. No problem." Bob clenched the cigar between his teeth and started for the exit. As he turned, I caught sight of a small listening device in his ear. I watched as others from the crowd began to follow him, some having been given no obvious signal.

"Michael." I felt someone brush against my arm and turned to see Luke at my side. "It's good to see you again." The two men shook hands.

"I'm glad to see you too," Michael replied.

"If trouble starts and you need me, just call."

"Excuse me for a moment," I said, stepping away and pulling out my cell phone. I dialed the hotel and asked for the suite.

Lena seemed relieved to hear my voice. "Christina, what's going on?"

"Not a whole lot yet," I told her. "Big party, big Brujah with big plans, princes with cemetery names, you know, same ol' same ol'. Listen, Lena, can you describe Talon for me?"

"Yes," she said, "tall, blond hair, beard and mustache, a blue jeans and tee shirt kinda guy. Why?"

"Native American?"

"No, definitely white. Why?"

"Well, the prince of LA is not your Talon," I told her softly.

"Oh." Lena sounded like the wind had been taken from her sails.

"We'll find him," I promised her. "I have a friend here who saw him a couple of months ago. Graves saved his life. And I know that he was alive just over a week ago because Jason spoke with him. We'll find Graves and we'll find Jason. I have to go, I'll keep you posted."

I placed my telephone back in the purse and returned to where Luke and Michael were. "Michael, do you have things covered here?" When he nodded, I turned to Luke. "Can you leave?"

"Yeah, I've been dismissed for the evening."

"Got a car?" I asked him.

Michael gestured to a blonde female Ventrue wearing a soft blue gown that stood nearby. He introduced her as Anna, then asked her if we could use her car.

"Of course, Michael," she said with an expression close to worship in her eyes as she looked at him. "Follow me," she told Luke and I.

"Call me if you need me," I told Michael.

As we turned and followed Anna outside, Luke put his hand in the small of my back. Moving through the crowd, I was able to break the contact without being too obvious about it. Sadly, I remembered when I'd welcomed Luke's touch, but now things were different.

Jason wasn't even in LA, but he still stood between Luke and me.

"We are happy to have Michael with us again," Anna said as we waited for the valet to bring her car around. "Although Belinda doesn't seem to be as pleased as the rest of us to have him back. They did share a haven for some time when he lived here last."

"Really," I said, interested.

"Yes. They don't now of course, and that makes all of us wonder about his status here. Are you close to him?"

I chose my words carefully. "Well, Antonio, the Tremere who took Michael in some time ago? He is my sire."

"So he's practically family then," she said, smiling at me.

"Yes, he's nearly a brother to me." I said nearly because I really didn't know Michael that well.

"Then you would know if he were still seeing that girl, Brenda, that he used to go with?"

"I don't think they are seeing each other right now," I replied cautiously.

Anna was obviously pleased. "Good."

I watched her closely as I said, "Actually, Brenda is now my sister. Antonio embraced her recently and she is studying in Massachusetts."

"Oh," she said her face a carefully blank mask as a Jaguar pulled up to the curb in front of us. "Oh, here's the car. Who is going to drive?"

"I am," I told her, "As long as Luke can direct me." Anna seemed relieved.

I thanked her as we got inside.

"Where are we going, babe?" Luke asked as we pulled away.

I pulled the note and key from my cleavage. "Here."

Look read the note and whistled softly. "Ritzy."

Luke directed me and after a few miles, we entered an elite neighborhood. I drove slowly and soon we found the address; a very ornate wrought iron fence with police tape across it spanned the drive. I drove down the street about a hundred yards and pulled off the road.

We walked back and as we approached the gate, flood lights and security cameras focused on us. We meandered past the drive and when we were out of sight of the cameras we started looking for a place to climb the tall fence.

We found a likely area within a few minutes. I wrapped my skirt around my waist just before Luke boosted me up. I carefully raised myself over the razor wire at the top and lowered myself to the ground. Luke failed on his first attempt to climb the fence, but made it on the second, only slightly tearing his pant leg at the top.

We walked quietly toward the house, watching for security devices or anything else that would give our presence away. As we circled the huge building, we found a large patio and pool at the rear. A massive garage stood to the right of the house with two large garage doors and a side entrance. I tried to approach the garage, but a motion detector set off floodlights. I backed quickly into the darkness beside Luke.

"We should go now," he whispered, touching my arm, "just walk up to the house."

"We're supposed to be staying in the shadows," I whispered back.

"We look more suspicious hiding like this," he hissed. I nodded reluctantly.

We strolled up to the back door as if we belonged there. I scanned the area by the door but could find no signs of an alarm system. Crossing my fingers I placed the key in the lock and turned it. The door swung open, and I could see a small red light flashing opposite of the door.

"Shit," I said. "Hurry, give me a number."

*Try the house number*, I heard. It was only after I entered the house number into the keypad and the red light changed to green that I realized it hadn't been Luke's voice I had heard.

Luke shut the door behind us and very little light shone inside the house. We could see we were in a pantry area with a closed door in front of us. Beside me, I could see Luke's eyes begin to glow red as he used his improved night vision to scan the room.

We walked through the lower level of the house. Luke handed me a lighter that allowed me to do some searching, although for the most part he could still see better than I could. I made a mental note to ask Luke to show me that trick.

In the music room, Luke handed me a compact disc case that, when opened, revealed a rose encased in clear acrylic. "Toreador clan," he said as he pocketed the case.

We headed up the stairway only to find Police tape strung across it half way up. I struck the lighter, revealing a white outline on the stairs. From the outline, we gathered that the body had landed head down. Bloodstains were everywhere.

"Do you see anything?" I asked Luke.

"I'll take a look," he replied.

While he searched the large hallway, I began looking closer at the stains. I gathered bits of the dried blood and 'tasted' them. After a time, I was able to come to several conclusions. The blood was from two different Kindred. There was no mortal blood in the room. The first Kindred was ninth generation and had fed recently. However, it was the other Kindred I found interesting.

The second Kindred had also fed recently. I was unable to determine the generation, but he or she had fed enough human blood to kill. In addition, I was able to sense that the prior feeding had been from wild blood, probably an animal. It also seemed that the Kindred had expended many blood points between the two feedings, perhaps pumping up for a battle, perhaps healing.

I could not determine the clan of either Kindred.

I walked over to where Luke was searching the floor. "Do you think we should return to the Coliseum or continue searching?" I asked.

He held up something small and glinting to the lighter flame. "Look at this." I looked closely to see an earring, a cross with points like daggers. In the center of the cross was a skull with the cross points emanating out of it. It was the sort of earring worn by a man usually, more specifically by the male Gangrel and Brujah clan members in LA.

"Do you know who this belongs to?"

He shook his head. "It looks familiar to me, but I can't place it. Let's keep looking for a few more minutes, then head back."

We went through the remaining rooms. We found the Master bedroom with a connecting door to another bedroom that must have belonged to the bodybuilder given all the weightlifting equipment inside.

I began to go through his things carefully. In a varsity jacket's pockets, I found several two-and-a-half-pound weights and as I pulled them out, I noticed one of them had a dark spot. It looked as if someone had been struck with it as it had blood and hair clotted on it. There was not enough blood for me to make any kind of identification.

I looked through a duffel bag to find changes of clothing, a bodybuilding poster and a small tool case. Also inside was a policeman's badge from Newark, New Jersey. Slowly I opened the case to reveal small metal darts, suitable for throwing. I put the case in my jacket pocket.

As we headed down the stairs to leave, my cell phone rang. It was Lena.

"Christina, where are you?" She sounded shaken.

"At Madelyn's house. Are you okay?"

"Have you found things there?" she asked urgently. "Things you need more information about?"

I hesitated. How could she have known? "Yes."

"You must bring them to me," she said strongly. "Now."

"All right," I said, not understanding her urgency. "We'll be there shortly."

"Who was that?" Luke asked as we walked to the pantry door and I reset the alarm.

"The mortal I told you about, Lena." I locked the door and we moved to the fence, keeping to the shadows. "She wants us to bring her the things we found."

Within fifteen minutes we were at the hotel. I opened the door to our suite and saw Lena standing within, waiting impatiently. She looked shaken.

"What's going on?" I asked, concerned about her behavior. "What's wrong?"

"Have you brought them?"

"Yes. Lena, this is Luke, a very good friend of mine. Luke, this is Lena. She's a... friend."

"Give them to me," Lena demanded, "one at a time. And be silent"

Luke looked at me strangely, seeming to say with his eyes, She's a friend?

Slowly I handed her the jacket. She took it gingerly and sat down, closing her eyes. After a moment, she said, "This belongs to a young man, blonde, very muscular."

"Yes," I confirmed.

She held the jacket for a moment, then folded it carefully and set it aside. "What else?"

Luke pulled the earring from his pocket and handed it to Lena. She closed her eyes again.

A moment later she jerked as if slapped. "I see a man wearing this earring. He is choking a woman and she is fighting to push him away. She is dying."

"Lena, what do they look like?" I asked gently.

"She looks... like Madelyn, the singer." I glanced at Luke as she continued. "I can't see him very well, only his ear and that he has long dark wavy hair." She handed the earring back to Luke and shuddered.

I pulled out the bloodstained weight and gave it to her. She took it from me and closed her eyes, but opened them after only a moment.

"Violence was done with this, I can see nothing more."

"Lena, can you get information from locations? Say a house?" Luke asked.

"Yes, why?"

"We should go back to the house," Luke said to me, "she may be able to gather more information."

I nodded. "Let me make a quick phone call. I hope we can get this straightened out tonight, I need to get back to Europe."

The phone rang several times, then clicked and rang again. A woman's voice answered.

"Michael Moorecock's phone, may I help you?"

"I need to speak to Michael right away," I said.

"I'm sorry, he's in a meeting with the board of directors. Can I have him call you?"

I thought I recognized the voice. "Anna?"

"Yes, who is this?"

"Christina. I need to speak to Michael, it's urgent."

She hesitated. "He went up to the council meeting with Robert."

I muttered obscenities. "Anna, I will be there very soon. I'll need to speak to Michael, Antonio, or Bob when I get there. Can you try to find one of them for me?"

"Yes."

"I'll be careful with your car."

"If speed is needed, it is fully insured," she assured me.

I thanked her and rang off. I looked at Lena. "Do you have a problem with Luke taking you to the house? Things are going down and I need to get back to the Coliseum."

"No problem," she said, but she looked at Luke uncertainly.

As she turned to get her things, I looked pointedly at Luke and handed him the key. "Take great care with her," I said sternly, "I have sworn her safety."

He bowed slightly. "Of course." As I turned to the door, he reached out and grabbed my hand, asking, "What if we find something?"

"Bring it to the Coliseum," I said then broke contact with him, moving quickly down the corridor and out to the car.



# DELAYS

Don't feed me sorrow

Pain is a poison I digest

Where the River Flows - Collective Soul

At the curb, I jumped into the Jaguar and drove toward the Coliseum. I drove quickly and I suppose it was inevitable that a police car began to follow, lights flashing. Cursing softly to myself, I continued on, driving even faster as I knew did not have time to stop.

I didn't see the truck pulling out ahead of me until it was too late. I swerved to avoid it and the car skidded dangerously. I lost control and the car rolled sickeningly, then landing upright against an embankment. For a time I was stunned.

Eventually I realized I was still in the car, pinned beneath the collapsed steering wheel and dash. I could barely move, and blood trickled from a cut above my eye. I rolled my head to the left and watched a tall blond police officer walk to the car.

"Just stay still, ma'am," he said soothingly. "We'll get you out soon."

I looked up at him half dazed. "Closer," I whispered.

He leaned closer to the car, but not quite close enough.

"Closer," I said softly. He leaned in and put his ear to my mouth. Making a great effort of willpower, I strained forward and clamped my fangs into his neck. Quickly I drank from him. As I heard another officer approach, I licked the wound, pulled back a little and looked into his eyes. "Forget."

"Don't move, ma'am," he said soothingly. "We'll get you out soon."

While the officer tried to get me to answer questions, I used the blood I'd taken to heal myself. I was still wounded, but I could at least function again. Then I used more blood to increase my strength.

I pushed at the wreckage, trying to move it enough to escape but to no avail. The dash moved only marginally, and a second attempt had no effect at all. The ring on my finger glittered in the lights of passing cars, taunting me for my failure.

"Stay still," the officer said, "you are hurt badly, don't try to move."

I rolled my head back and moaned, trying desperately to find a way out. The policeman's blood was not enough to sustain me; I had lost and spent too much blood. I felt consciousness sliding away and fought ruthlessly to keep it. *I must find a way, I thought. I must get out of the car I must get to Michael and Antonio and the Siren and I have to save Jason...*

Within moments, the battle was lost. Jason....

*...I opened my eyes to see that everything was bright and hazy, as if a fog covered the land. I stood on a mountainside and the landscape as far as I could see was rocky and desolate. The mountain's peak rose from the fog, allowing me to identify it as Mt. Helena, Montana.*

*As I looked to the right, I saw the outcropping called Eagle's Point. But that can't be right, I thought, Eagle's Point was destroyed when—*

*When what?*

*"Tina," a voice said aloud. It was the voice that I had often heard in my dreams over the last five years.*

*I turned to see a tall handsome man with dark wavy hair and a beard walking toward me through the fog. As he got closer, I could see that his eyes were green.*

*"Who are you," I demanded, but somehow I felt I should know.*

*"You must survive, 'Tina," he told me in a soft, familiar voice.*

*"What are you talking about?"*

*"The car," he said, waiving a hand to the left. A hole opened in the fog to reveal the wreck of the Jaguar and my unconscious body slumped behind the wheel. "You must survive."*

*"Why do you care?" I turned back to him and blinked in surprise when I realized he was standing very close to me.*

*He raised a hand to caress my face. "I care."*

*"Who are you," I asked softly, unable to move away from his touch.*

*"Go back," he whispered, "save him."*

*My eyes widened. "How do you know these things?"*

*"I know much about you, 'Tina," he said, smiling.*

*The bracelet on my wrist seemed to grow warm as the fog rose and swallowed us. Soon I could see nothing but the man before me. Dimly I realized that he had a small scar on his neck, just under his ear.*

*"Go back," he whispered as the fog began to claim him.*

*"Wait," I pleaded, "at least tell me your name!"*

*"You know my name," he said as he faded completely away.*

*And suddenly I did.*

*"Robert!" I screamed as the fog embraced me.*

I awoke slowly in a swaying darkness. I felt strong arms around me and my face rested against a hard male chest. I smiled, for a moment thinking it was Jason holding me so tenderly. Then I remembered that Jason was missing.

I inhaled the musky aroma of the man and knew it was Luke who held me, protected me in the darkness. I pulled away from him as much as I could in the cramped quarters and noticed we seemed to be moving at a high rate of speed.

"Where am I?" I whispered.

"In the trunk of a sedan," a voice I recognized as Lena's answered.

"Babe, do you need...?" Luke asked softly in my ear.

I felt weak and dizzy and knew I was precariously low on blood. "Yes," I whispered to him.

Luke pulled me back toward his body until my lips were against the skin of his neck. With some reluctance, I bit into him and as I drank I used some of his blood to complete the healing process. His blood was thick and rich, better than the human blood we Kindred normally feed on. I relished the taste of him in my mouth even as I longed for the taste of Jason's blood.

When I was finished, I licked the wound on his neck closed and rested my cheek on his chest. "What's going on?" I asked.

Lena answered. "We're on our way to the Coliseum."

"How did you get me out of the car?"

Luke's chest rumbled beneath my cheek as he laughed. "Can't you see we're paramedics?"

"As I don't have your night vision, I can't see anything. How long before we arrive?" I shifted a little to reach my left hand with my right and began to twist my ring nervously in the darkness.

"How long before we arrive?" I heard Lena ask. "Three minutes," she said to me.

"Who are you talking to?"

"Burkoff, a friend of Michael's."

I had heard the name before. "What happened at the house?"

"It was very disturbing," Lena told me. "I saw a man and a woman fighting, teeth extended. He told her that her usefulness was over and when she asked why, he snapped her neck. There was blood everywhere." I could feel her shudder delicately. "It was most disturbing."

The car rocked to a stop and the trunk popped open. Luke reluctantly released me then climbed out quickly, helping first me then Lena out. I could see two men coming from the front of the car and Anna near the Coliseum doors. I nodded at the two men and walked toward Anna.

"Stay close to me," I heard one of the men tell Lena. "Are you armed? Can you handle a weapon?"

"Yes," she replied.

"Are you all right, Christina?" Luke asked me, walking at my side and placing a hand in the small of my back.

"I'm fine," I replied, glancing up at him and attempting to smile. Oddly, I had forgotten how handsome Luke actually was.

When we reached Anna's side, I said apologetically to her, "I am so sorry about the car."

"I understand," she told me, looking at my torn and bloody dress. "This just gives me an excuse to buy another."

"Perhaps I could help?"

"You do seem to need some shopping done," she said smiling. "We could also look for a car."

"Of course," I said, returning her smile briefly.

"We're wasting time," Luke said gruffly. "Let's go."

# FALLOUT

We turn the wheel and break the chain  
Put steel to steel and laugh at pain  
Heart of Stone - Cher

We entered the Coliseum and moved quickly toward the elevators. Burkoff explained that we would stop the elevator one floor short of the top. Luke, Anna and I would get off and go to the top floor by way of the staircase. Lena would stay with the others until it was safe.

I removed the gun from my purse and checked to make sure it was still fully loaded with phosphorous rounds. It was the only ammunition that could kill Kindred, if only because they exploded into fire upon impact. Fire was one of the few things that killed Kindred, decapitation was another.

We went quickly to the stairway and moved silently upward. At the top, we carefully opened the door and stepped into the middle of a standoff. Each side of the hall was lined with Kindred; it seemed there were close to forty standing there, guns drawn. Ventrue, Gangrel and other clans were clustered on the right while Brujah and more Gangrel lined the left.

We worked our way slowly over to Michael, Luke never leaving my side.

"Did you bring evidence?" Michael barked.

"Yes," I replied. Luke by my side with his shoulder brushing against mine, reassuring me with his nearness.

"It had better be good" he told me.

I moved to get a clear shot at the Gangrel woman who had shared Luke's guard duty and found myself standing next to Bob. "Hi," I said softly.

"Hi."

"Looks like a hot time in the old town tonight," I commented.

I saw him grin from the corner of my eye. The large gun in his hand moved ever so slightly. "Just a lot of fun."

Suddenly the door at the end of the hall opened and Vinney stood in the doorway. He was chewing on a toothpick and flipping a silver dollar in his hand. He grinned.

"David," he called over his shoulder, "ya gotta see this."

David joined him in the doorway. Beside me, I felt Luke shift a little.

"Judgement comes calling," Vinney said.

David moved to push Vinney aside and enter the hall. Vinney's hand was suddenly filled with a pistol pointed at David's head. David froze.

"Go ahead," Vinney growled, "give me an excuse."

"Enough, childer!" The prince's voice rang out down the hall and Graves appeared behind them in the doorway.

Vinney's gun disappeared back into his sleeve and the quarter began flipping again. "Too bad, you get a rebate on your life today. Some other time."

David glared at Vinney as he moved back into the room.

"This ends tonight," Graves growled. "Does anyone have anything to say that they are willing to stake final death on?"

"My prince," Michael said respectfully, "I have brought you further evidence in the case against the Caitiff." Caitiff are Kindred without clan, outcasts.

"That matter has been thoroughly investigated," Graves replied.

"Not quite," I said.

Graves looked at me for the first time. "Ah, the newcomer."

"She has evidence to present before you," Michael interjected.

Graves studied the Kindred in the hallway for a moment. "Bring me the evidence and everyone involved," he ordered, then disappeared back into the room, David following.

"Do we dare bring Lena through this?" I asked Michael.

"He did say everyone involved," Luke said loudly, putting a hand on my shoulder. "I don't think anyone would interfere and risk the prince's wrath."

Luke and I went together to the elevator, where he put an earpiece on and said, "Bring it up, Burkoff."

A moment later the elevator door opened. The driver of the car and Burkoff seemed nonplused about the scene before them, but Lena was clearly taken aback.

"Like a walk in the park," Burkoff told her.

We returned to Michael and he took Lena's arm, explaining to her the ways off addressing a prince as we entered the room, every Kindred eye in the hall following us.

I put my gun in my jacket pocket as we stood just inside the closed doors. Michael walked over to the prince who was sitting on his rug cross-legged. Graves gestured for Michael to sit and he did so, handing a packet of tobacco to the prince, whose woman knelt behind him.

I looked around the room, noting the curved tables to either side of the prince behind which the Primogen sat. To my left, I could identify Belinda, the Ventrue Primogen, then David who was obviously the Brujah leader. Beside him sat a tall man with long dark wavy hair. He appeared Gangrel and I noticed his ear was pierced, but he wasn't wearing an earring. To my right were Madelyn, the Toreador primogen, Vinney, whom I figured must be Malkavian, and Antonio. I also noted the Caitiff near the back of the room to the right, his guards surrounding him. He looked very angry.

I nodded to my sire and he returned the greeting with a smile.

Michael and Graves went through the ritual of smoking the Peace Pipe, with a 'no lies between us' phrase spoken near the end. It was obvious the two men held great respect for each other.

When they had finished, Graves asked, "If you can, Michael, help me find the Path of Peace. What is the evidence you bring before me?"

"My prince," Michael replied, "these people, two of whom have no ties to this area, have taken it upon themselves to investigate this murder. I ask protection for them as what they do endangers their lives."

"My people have investigated this matter." Graves reminded him.

Michael glanced at the Gangrel and Brujah Primogens sitting nearby. "It is my belief that those you sent to investigate did not bring all of the facts before you."

The Gangrel stood quickly, nearly knocking the table over. Michael's head spun to look at him, a hand going inside his jacket. Antonio also reached for a weapon.

Presence was tangible throughout the room as those Kindred who possessed the ability fought to gain an upper hand. I could see Madelyn staring at the Gangrel, who took a half step backward from her awesome gaze.

The prince looked around. "My childer, sit," he ordered firmly. Those at the table did so, while everyone standing, myself included, looked around for a place to sit. "Michael, continue."

Michael looked again at the Gangrel. "Not all the facts were brought before you, my prince. The outsiders have investigated and they have new evidence to bring before you." Michael turned and gestured to us.

"Protection is granted. Continue," Graves said after a thoughtful pause.

Michael looked at me and I moved forward. "Christina Strong, the childe of Antonio Moreno whom you met earlier this evening."

I bent over the prince's hand, kissed it, and stepped back.

Michael turned to Luke. "Luke Thomas, a member of the divided Gangrel clan in our fair city."

Luke also moved forward and kissed Graves' hand, then stepped back.

Michael held a hand out to Lena, who took it and went to his side. "My prince, this Kine has been an aid to a Methuselah in the past. She has protected our causes and the Masquerade. She has abilities and talents that have allowed her to discover much information previously overlooked or unknown. May I present Her Ladyship Lena Stockton."

Graves studied her closely for a moment and gestured for her to sit.

As she did so, Lena removed a large pin from her blouse and presented it to the prince, who took it from her hands. "My prince, it does my heart good to see the ways of our people living boldly and proudly within this city. I apologize for the inadequacy of the gift I bring you, but please take it as a token of my respect and thankfulness to you."

The prince studied her for a time, then reached for the Peace Pipe. He performed the ceremony again with Lena, then set the pipe aside. He looked up at Michael. "Present your information."

Michael looked at me and I cleared my throat. When I had the prince's attention, I told him of the key and note that were given to me in the elevator. I explained how Luke and I went to the house and gave him the information I had gleaned from the blood on the steps and the landing.

Lena recounted the visions she had seen as I pulled the weight from my pocket and handed it to Graves, telling him that she believed it had been used to incapacitate the Caitiff. Then I showed him the compact disc case we had found.

The prince took the case and crushed the acrylic, pulling out the rose. He smelled it for a moment. "Once vivid and alive, this rose saw many things in it's own life, even in death it has a story to tell."

He put the flower on the floor in front of him and closed his eyes. I noted that David reacted strongly to the prince's actions, even to a split second glow of red in his eyes. When Graves opened his eyes, rage filled them. His gaze turned on David.

"Visions of becoming prince," Graves said thoughtfully, looking at the Brujah.

"Maybe if you came out of your dream world long enough to rule this city, you wouldn't have those guns in the hall," David cried, leaping to his feet and slamming his fist on the table. "Yes, I have ambition. But I've done nothing Kindred law can enforce!"

David looked angrily at Madelyn. "So your mortal patsy died, why should we care?"

Madelyn looked close to frenzy at this point, and Vinney laid a hand on her arm in an attempt to calm her.

When the room fell silent, I turned and held out my hand to Luke, who placed the earring in my palm. "I believe someone lost this at the crime scene," I said softly, looking at the Gangrel primogen pointedly. "Lose something?" I asked him.

Suddenly the prince, moving almost too fast for the eye to see, was on David with his claws extended. The Gangrel dove toward the platform. David and Graves exchanged blows, and then

David was on the floor with the prince's hands buried in his chest, ready to pull the heart from his body. That was another way to kill a Kindred.

"Graves!" Madelyn's voice called out in warning. "Tracy!"

I turned to see that the Gangrel, Tracy, had grabbed Graves' woman from behind and held a gun to her head. Graves froze.

Slowly I put my hand in my pocket and tried to step forward to protect Lena, but Luke wouldn't allow it; he nudged me aside and protected her himself. I opened the case in my jacket and extracted a dart, then slowly returned my hand to my side. I heard Luke's pair of guns cock to my left, along with Michael's at my right where he was still sitting on the floor.

*Christina*, I heard in my mind, Antonio's voice reaching me, *Watch my back*. I turned to see two of the Caitiff's guards standing behind Antonio, each partially hidden by his body.

I shot Antonio the quick message, *Two close behind you*.

Then the one on the right moved, bringing up a pistol. Instantly I threw the dart, hitting that Kindred in the face. As he spun, I heard several gunshots echo throughout the room. A quick glance to my left while I pulled my gun showed Luke firing a second shot into Tracy's head as he fell away from the woman.

I turned back to Antonio and watched the man I'd hit fall as I fired at the other guard who's head exploded. Antonio pulled a smoking gun from his jacket as I watched the Caitiff trip one of the two remaining guards and turn to literally pull the other apart.

Antonio rose and stepped on the hand of the guard on the floor, leveling his pistol at the man's head. "Please, try," he drawled. The Gangrel pushed his gun away and it skidded across the floor.

I turned to see that Tracy was dead and that Graves' woman was bleeding while Lena tried to support her. Luke moved to help her get to Graves, who looked in the midst of frenzy, blood dripping from his claws as he looked at his woman.

Vinney stood before Madelyn, a modified Tommy Gun in his hands. A violin case lay open at his feet. Belinda was in the back left corner of the room, leaning against the wall. David lay bleeding on the floor, not yet dead.

Graves' woman finally reached his side and lay her hands on his chest. She spoke to him softly in her native language, and gradually the fire in his eyes died.

I walked over to the Caitiff and handed him the dart case. "Thanks for the loan."

He looked down at the case. "I never thought I'd see these again," he whispered. "But then I never thought I'd see anything like this either."

Antonio gestured to the mutilated corpse on the floor. "Now you're guilty of one."

The Caitiff nodded.

I went to Antonio's side. "Are you all right?"

He smiled. "Yes, my childe. Nice move, you have learned much since I've been away," he added, gesturing toward the headless body on the floor.

I returned the smile, for a moment forgetting my worries. It was good to be with Antonio again. "You said to watch your back."

We looked toward the prince and saw him holding his woman in his arms. She was healing quickly.

Lena walked toward the prince with a tablecloth for him to clean the blood from his hands and arms. As he took it, he said, "You have risked much to come around our kind."

She smiled. "It is not the first time, my prince."

Graves shifted the woman in his arms to lay a hand on Lena's shoulder. "You will always be an honored guest in my home." He turned to Luke who had moved to Lena's side. "You and your friend have also risked much here tonight."

"It is right and proper for us to support our prince," Luke told him with a slight bow.

"I wonder if Van Able might have had something to do with this?" Antonio murmured to himself.

The Caitiff must have been listening, as he spoke up. "That name sounds familiar," he said, pulling a letter from his pocket. "I took this note shortly before I was attacked."

"Can I see it?" I took the letter and read it. It was very short. One line read 'Although it took longer than I thought, Graves has been taken care of.' "Oh my God," I whispered.

"What?" Antonio asked.

I didn't answer him, but walked over to where Lena now stood talking to Luke. "Lena," I said, touching her shoulder lightly, trying to see through the tears glittering in my eyes. Grief nearly overcame me as I mourned for Jason's friend. "I need you to sit down."

"What is it?" she asked as she saw my difficulty.

"Sit!" I ordered. When she found a chair, I crouched before her. "Lena, I'm afraid something might have happened to your Talon."

"No," she cried, tears filling her eyes.

"Yes," I said. "This letter says that he's been 'taken care of.'" I gave her the note, holding her hand as she read the letter. She cried for a short while, then excused herself to wash her face.

By the time she returned I had gathered myself and looked around for Michael, calling his name. Michael walked over. "Yes?"

"I need a favor," I said softly. "I need your friend to find the location of a cell phone."

Michael looked at Burkoff who stood only a few feet away. Burkoff nodded and said, "I can't do it from here, but give me the number and I can get it for you."

"Get me the location," I said, "then get me there."

I turned to Luke. "Are you with me?"

"Yes," he said, looking at me intently. I couldn't read the look in his eyes, or maybe I just didn't want to.

"Lena?"

"Jason is our best bet in finding Graves," she whispered through her tears, "I'm in."

*Funny, I thought to myself, I believed that Graves was the best bet to finding Jason.*

"Burkoff will make the arrangements for you to use my plane again," Michael told us.

"Thank you," I said, touching him lightly on his hand.



# PREPARATIONS

Some days it don't come easy

Some days it don't come hard

I'd Do Anything For Love (But I Won't Do That) - Meat Loaf

Lena and I decided to return to our hotel room. I kissed Antonio on the cheek and told him good night.

Upon leaving the prince's conference room, my mind began to spin. Burkoff had said it would be fifteen to twenty hours before he could determine the location of Jason's phone. Would we reach Jason in time? On the other hand, was it too late already?

We found Anna in the hall and after greeting her, I asked where the feeding rooms were and how we could get back to the hotel. She led us to the elevator and to the floor the feeding stock was on. We left Lena near a bank of telephones and walked down a winding corridor.

"Any preference?" she asked.

"Yes," I replied thoughtfully, one face filling my mind, "Tall, short blonde hair, hazel eyes." I blinked to clear the image of Jason away.

"I think I have just the thing," Anna said, leading the way to a door a little further down the hall. She opened the door to reveal a small office. The man inside came to his feet and faced the door, an expectant look in his hazel eyes.

"His name is Mark," she told me as I walked in, "Bon appetit." I heard the door close quietly behind me but didn't turn.

I studied Mark. He wasn't exactly what I was looking for, but Jason was thousands of miles away. This would be the closest I could come to him for a long time, maybe forever. Slowly I walked across the room to stand before him.

The man was a little too tall, a little too thin, and his eyes held a bit too much green. Briefly I closed my eyes, then looked up at him and forced a smile. I put my arms around his neck and nearly moaned when his arms encircled me. I nuzzled his neck for a few minutes, letting his body warm mine.

For a time we stood there together, Mark holding me while I swayed against him. In that brief interval I was able to pretend it was Jason holding me and that I knew he was alive and safe.

Suddenly I could see Jason so clearly in my mind as he had been the night we had sat in a van on a back road in Pennsylvania. He had been going by 'Martín' at the time, and his long dark hair was muted in the dim dome light.

*"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.*

*After I had gotten 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 remembered wondering at the time 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."*

I caught sight of my hand on Mark's shoulder with its diamonds glittering brightly, and I could pretend no longer. Tears filled my eyes as my teeth extended and I bit into his neck, his blood filling my mouth. I gulped it down, trying very hard not to notice that it tasted nothing like Jason's. I drank several for several minutes until I was supporting Mark as he swayed on his feet. Slowly I withdrew my teeth, closed the bite and sat him down gently in a chair.

For a moment I stood looking down at him, his head leaning back, his eyes closed. He was breathing quickly, fighting to recover from the loss of blood.

I licked my fangs clean and retracted them, almost disappointed that no trace of Kindred blood had been within him. Briefly, I wondered what drove this man to offer himself as sustenance to vampires.

I bent and kissed his cheek gently while cupping his face in my hand. He opened his eyes and smiled up at me. I returned his smile weakly and left the room to rejoin Anna in the hall.

At one look at my face, she took my arm and led me toward where we had left Lena. "What's wrong?"

I shook my head, trying to collect myself. "I was just thinking of someone else."

"Does this concern the trip you spoke of?"

"Yes." I found myself playing with the ring again and forced myself to stop.

She patted my shoulder. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Can you open a magic portal that leads to his side?" I joked.

"No," she said solemnly, "but I can make sure Michael's jet is ready when Burkoff gives you his location."

I smiled at her. "That would be appreciated."

Ahead of us, Luke rounded a corner walking in our direction.

"Would you like me to head him off?" Anna asked, glancing at my face.

"No, I'll be alright." I struggled to pull myself together before he reached us.

Luke was now dressed in jeans and a T-shirt. "Hi."

"You certainly look more comfortable," Anna told him.

"Yeah, I can breathe now," he replied.

*It's easy, Jason's voice drawled in my mind, Just put your lips together and blow.*

Once more tears filled my eyes and I stopped. I tried to get a hold of my emotions while I bent as if to adjust a torn stocking. Again the diamonds on the ring glittered brightly in the overhead lights.

"Are these the feeding rooms?" Luke asked, oblivious to my condition.

"Yes," Anna replied. "Use any of them but 208, Christina feed pretty deeply from that one."

"All right," he said, "I'll meet you back at your hotel."

I straightened as he walked away.

"You sure you're okay?" Anna whispered.

"I'll be fine," I said, angry with myself for the lack of control. By the time we walked down to where we left Lena, I had a better grip on myself. I could also tell that Lena was upset.

"Lena, what's wrong?" I asked gently.

Lena brushed a tear from her cheek. "There's just a lot of stuff to deal with right now."

"In the mean time," Anna said, "You ladies need your beauty sleep. Let me get you back to the hotel and first thing tomorrow evening we'll go shopping." She led us outside where we waited for Michael's car to be brought around.

"The prince said he spoke with a woman who was looking for my Talon," Lena told me softly.

"Does he know who she was?"

"Aristocracy."

That didn't mean much, but it could mean a lot. A countess had lost her crystal, after all. Maybe finding her would help us find out what had happened to Jason. He was Graves' ghoul, and the message Lena had received warned of an attack on the Gangrel.

Shortly after we arrived back at the hotel, Luke came in and Lena excused herself to go to bed. I sat and talked with Anna about things I felt we needed to pick up before leaving LA. She told me she'd help me find everything I needed.

During this conversation, Luke lounged in a chair, looking every inch the Gangrel. As Anna rose to leave, he did also.

"I think I'll find an alternative place to rest today," Luke said, grinning. "It doesn't look too good that the prince gave me Tracey's bike."

"You can stay here if you like," I offered impulsively. "If you don't mind sleeping on the couch in the bedroom, I plan to 'spooky-boo' the room against the sun." He agreed.

We said our good-byes to Anna and set out the 'Do not disturb' sign on the door. I quickly performed the now familiar ritual and lay down on the bed, listening to Luke settle himself on the couch.

As I waited for the sun to rise, I was very conscious of Luke lying across the room. I remembered the last night Estrea, Luke and myself had spent in Vegas together, just before Jason had entered my life. We had gone to the casinos and spent time gambling and dancing.

Luke had held me close while we danced and I remembered thinking that perhaps it was time to explore our relationship further. Of course, I met Jason the next night and my feelings for Luke were overshadowed by what I'd felt for Jason.

I thought about Jason, wondering where and how he was spending the night. As sweet as it had been to be held by Mark, it really had not been the same. I'd been a fool to ask for someone who even remotely resembled Jason.

My ring was heavy on my finger. I felt the blood tears begin and struggled to hold them back. I wanted no questions about bloodstained pillowcases when I woke up.

I awoke as the sun went down and sat up to watch Luke do the same. "Good evening."

"Good evening," he replied, adding, "Your hair looks nice tonight."

I chuckled ruefully, enjoying his attention for the first time in a long time. "My hair is a mess from sleeping on it all day. If you'll excuse me, I'll freshen up."

Luke went into the sitting room and I caught a glimpse of Lena on the phone before he closed the door.

I changed into black pants and a maroon blouse. Over it I put on a black jacket that hid my holster and gun. I brushed my hair and lightly applied makeup, then joined Luke and Lena.

I asked Luke if he planned to join us shopping, as I needed a man's opinion of certain items I was going to purchase. He agreed.

Lena filled me in on her telephone conversations. Apparently Kyle was Garou and he was the reason she had been in New York when I'd called her. Kyle had been ill, but was much better now and had joined Mikael at the holding in Austria. Mikael and his family had turned back the KGB agents from the village, killing them all. I couldn't help but be saddened at the news; even one of those agents might have given us a lead on Jason's location.

Lena had also spoken to Mikael and he had informed her of a package that had arrived at the castle. She seemed puzzled about the fact he wouldn't tell her what was in it, wanting her to see it for herself when we met up with him in a few nights.

When the front desk called up to tell us a limousine had arrived, we went downstairs. A Ventrue met us in the lobby and introduced himself as Douglas Van Hoosen. He explained that he was to take us to the house that Anna awaited us at. We went out to the car where two other Ventrue sat waiting, dressed in business suits. I glanced briefly at Luke, who obviously felt out of place in his frayed jeans.

Lena discussed finances with the others while Luke glared broodingly out the window. I half listened to the conversation, going over in my mind the things I planned to buy that night. I wondered if Burkoff had pinpointed the location of Jason's cell phone yet.

Something Douglas said made me pay closer attention to the conversation. "Then a week ago she sold the shares, like she was afraid of something." Douglas went on to say that Belinda had been close to Michael before, but was different with him now, almost cold.

I touched Luke's hand to get his attention. "How long has Michael been in town?"

"A week, why?" he asked.

I nodded to myself and went back to looking out the window, frowning slightly when I found myself again twisting the ring that Jason had given me.

As we pulled up in front of a large expensive home, Luke whispered to me, "Don't mention Michael to Anna tonight."

"Why?" I saw Anna and Michael walking down the steps. Michael was not in his usual suit, but dressed in all black; Anna did not look happy. Michael climbed in a sports car and drove away.

"They were arguing," Luke told me. "I don't think she'll appreciate any reminders."

As Anna approached the limousine, Douglas got out and helped her in.

As soon as she settled herself, I said, "Anna, have you heard from Burkoff?"

"I think Michael talked to him a few minutes ago," she replied.

"Has he learned anything?"

"Nothing so far, but it shouldn't be too much longer," she told me, sympathy in her eyes.

We dropped the other Ventrue off at a tall office building, then went on to a hair salon. I had mentioned to Anna about getting a slightly different look for our trip, and she had called ahead. We entered the building and a gentleman in a bright pink suit named Clarence was there to greet us.

Clarence exclaimed over my hair and when I explained what I wanted, he got to work, watching Luke from the corner of his eye.

"He is a handsome man," Clarence whispered to me. "Is he your man?"

I grinned. "I believe he's his own man."

Soon my hair was changed from its normal dark brown to a deep auburn and, thanks to contact lenses Clarence was able to find for me, my eyes were a bright blue. Then he trimmed Lena's hair and added subtle highlights.

From the salon, we went to a large mall where we started in a man's clothing store. We got Luke several suits, and I was able to pick up a few things for Jason as well, remembering our luggage still in Italy at the monastery.

Then came our serious shopping. Most of what I picked up I made sure was very alluring, if not quite demure. Tempting with style, Anna called it. I found a few other items for Jason along the way that I thought might blend in with the natives of Russia. Luke never strayed far from my side as we shopped, always there to take my bags or tell me what clothing looked best on me.

Lena picked up a few items for herself, and a large hide painting of a wolf, which she had shipped to Mikael. When I took a closer look at it, I realized it looked almost exactly like Mikael when he was in wolf form. I suppressed a shudder and turned away.

Anna was using Michael's credit cards and spending quite heavily. When she occasionally paused in her shopping, she looked worried. Given Michael's dress when he left the house, I knew he was reverting to the Ventrue Gunman I had heard so much about from Antonio.

Finally near three a.m., we figured we had everything that we needed. I spoke with Anna on the way to the limousine about getting alternative identification, and she suggested we go ask Burkoff, which suited me just fine. I was impatient to know if he'd found Jason.

# THE WAREHOUSE

He walked the streets a soldier  
And he fought the world alone  
18 and Life - Skid Row

We drove to the shadier side of LA and through a guard post in the parking lot of a large warehouse. We parked the car and entered through a well-lighted entry into an empty room with surveillance cameras in evidence.

Anna stepped forward and identified all of us. A door to the left slid open and we entered an elevator. When it stopped, we exited into a large room filled with computers and electronic equipment. Burkoff was standing alone near the end of a counter that held only an aircraft aluminum briefcase similar to the ones Jason and Michael normally carried.

Anna walked over to him and began speaking in a low urgent voice. I opened myself to their auras and I could see that Anna was suspicious and afraid. She kept glancing at the briefcase and I figured it must be Michael's.

Burkoff's aura confused me; he seemed both idealistic and determined at the same time. *About what?* I wondered.

Lena's cell phone rang and as she answered it, I moved closer to the briefcase. I noticed a spot on the counter close to it that gleamed wet and dark in the bright light. I looked at the briefcase, then at Burkoff, then back at the spot.

"Burkoff," I said loudly, cutting into their conversation and pointing to the spot, "what's this?"

He turned and looked stunned. Anna reached over and touched the spot then brought her hand to her mouth to taste it. Suddenly she went absolutely wild, throwing Burkoff across the room and screaming.

I backed off; Kindred in Frenzy are likely to kill anything in their way. Then I noticed another spot halfway across the room. As I moved toward it, keeping an eye on Anna, I saw a door open and Michael move in. Quickly and painfully he was at Anna's side, pulling her off Burkoff. She fought him for a moment, then seemed to realize who he was and calm down.

Michael let go of her as soon as she regained control and staggered back. He turned toward the counter and nearly fell. I could see his clothes were soaked with blood and there was a gaping hole in his side. Anna grabbed his arm and helped him over to a stool. When he sat down, she held her wrist up before him.

He looked at her intently, then took her hand and bit greedily into her wrist. She swayed with the force of his hunger.

"No my prince," Lena said loudly enough to get everyone's attention, "there is no problem here."

Michael raised his head, his mouth still on Anna's wrist, and motioned Lena to bring him the phone. She took it to him and he held it for a moment, drinking a bit more from Anna. Then he drew back and licked the wound closed, glancing briefly at her face before raising the phone to his ear.

"My prince," he said. "The newcomer. I believe he came from the southern part of the state. Looks like war. It's going to take a few days. That's all I know. Yes." He handed Lena back the phone and leaned wearily on the counter top.

Luke walked over and offered an arm to Michael who took it, drinking heavily. His wound had closed somewhat, but he still looked very bad when he let go of Luke's wrist.

I could hear Lena telling the prince of Michael's condition as I stepped up and offered my own wrist. I shivered as his teeth penetrated my flesh—Jason had been the only one until now to drink

from me, and then only because of the injury he'd sustained the night we had found my father. For a moment I was caught in the 'kiss,' then I felt his teeth withdraw and his tongue drag against my skin, sealing the wound.

When he straightened, Michael seemed to be dealing with the pain. The wounds must have been aggravated; it was the only explanation as to why he wasn't fully healed.

I walked over to where Burkoff stood dusting himself off. He seemed shaken, but all right.

Anna apologized to him, but he merely chuckled. "Hell hath no fury," he murmured as he moved to Michael's side.

"We have to relocate our assets," Michael said calmly. "There is a new Brujah boss in town, a smart one. He wants the key players in LA out of the picture."

"Burkoff, can you come up with new identities for our friends quickly?" Anna asked. "They will be leaving at dawn."

"Sure."

Michael nodded. "I may have to take a trip after sunrise, Burkoff, make arrangements for Mexico."

"Have you found Jason's phone?" I asked softly.

"Yes," Burkoff told me. "It's in Moscow."

I bowed my head and closed my eyes. Soon, I promised myself.

I heard Lena hang up her phone and call me to her. "We need to stop in Detroit," she said, "Graves located the countess."

"They found Jason," I told her trying to contain my excitement. "He's in Moscow."

"You mean his phone is in Moscow," she said not unkindly.

"Yes," I agreed slowly, no longer able to meet her eyes. "His phone."

"You know we can't go until we are fully prepared," she whispered. "We won't do him any good if we get captured ourselves."

I turned away. "I know."

"Luke," Michael said firmly, "The prince wants you to stay here for now. He needs all the help he can get."

The Gangrel glanced at me, then said reluctantly, "Of course."

Anna picked up a nearby phone and began to dial. "You'll be flying out at dawn. I'll call the hotel and have them send your things to the airport."

Burkoff took Lena and I into a small room to get pictures for our new I.D.s. Burkoff then told us he would send a courier with the I.D.s, the electronic items I had asked for and the backgrounds we would need to us in Detroit. He warned us to read the profiles very carefully and to shred them when we had memorized the information.

When we returned to the main room, Michael rose and wished us luck.

I looked at him closely, noting the strain his wounds were causing. "I have to believe that somehow what we are doing will help you too, Michael." When he nodded, I asked, "Is Antonio okay? Will he be safe?"

Michael laughed softly. "Antonio is at the Tremere Chantry. No other clan would be stupid enough to go there."

The elevator doors opened and Bob stepped in leading half a dozen men dressed like commandos. A large black human accompanied him to our side.

"Ladies," Bob said, "This is Corporal Green. He is a recent recruit to our side, and will be your pilot until you reach Germany. He will see to your safety as long as he's with you."

Corporal Green nodded at us. "Ma'am."

"Where is your luggage?" Bob asked.

"Some things are being sent to the airport from the hotel," I said, "but we do have packages in the limousine outside."

Corporal Green bowed slightly. "I will see to the transfer." He went back into the elevator with two of the other men.

Michael stood and placed a hand on Bob's shoulder. "We'll be going on a recruitment mission in Mexico, Bob. Then we'll come back and deal with Cyrus."

Bob grinned. "Sure thing, Boss."

I hugged Anna and thanked her for everything she had done for us. "Please call me if I can repay your kindness in any way."

"Yes," Lena added. "You have been wonderful."

Anna smiled. "It has been my pleasure."

Lena handed Michael a business card. "I could say let's do lunch, but dinner seems more appropriate."

"Any time, milady," he replied. Then he turned to me and gave me a brief hug. "Take care, Christina."

"I will, Michael," I said softly in his ear. "If I speak to Brenda, is there anything you want me to tell her?" Brenda and Michael had been quite an item before Antonio had embraced her. They had grown apart afterward because Michael couldn't handle her change.

He pulled away and led us to the elevator doors and away from where Anna stood talking to Burkoff. "Please don't mention any of this to her, I wouldn't want her worried."

"I think she'd like to know," I said firmly.

"She has a new life now," he replied, "new clan, new prince--"

"New friends," I added. "I understand she's been training with Micky lately." I looked at his aura; it was gray, the color of sadness.

He pushed the elevator button. "Yes, I understand that as well."

"Michael, if you don't mind my asking, what's going on between you two?"

"I don't know," he said, stepping into the elevator. As Lena, Luke and I followed, he said softly to me, "Things are much different now, her being what she is. I'm afraid she thinks I was trying to control her by not giving her the embrace, but I was just trying to spare her the reality of this existence."

"She's dealing well with it, Michael," I told him.

"Yes, for now."

"Do you think there's any chance the two of you will work things out?" I whispered.

"I'd like that," he replied as we stepped into the entryway. He turned to me. "Tell her I'm thinking about her. And don't mention Mexico."

"I won't."

Michael placed his hands on my shoulders. "Take care of yourself. This is a dangerous situation."

"I know," I told him. "I'll be careful. Will you keep an eye on Antonio for me? I worry about him."

"He worries about you too, Christina," Michael said as he released me.



"I think I have far too many men worrying for my safety," I said with a sad smile. "I'm learning to take care of myself." I allowed my smile to widen until the points of my elongated fangs showed.

Michael laughed as we walked out the door.

At the car, I hugged Luke goodbye. His heart was in his eyes as he kissed my cheek gently. Somehow I felt this was a replay of the last time I'd seen Jason; again I was leaving someone I cared very much about and had no idea if I would ever see him again. I told myself that Luke had to stay here and help his prince and that I had to go and find Jason.

"Take care of yourself, babe," Luke whispered into my ear as he ran a hand through my hair.

"I will, Luke," I told him, touching the side of face gently.

Lena and I got into the back of a dark sedan and Corporal Green took the driver's seat. As we pulled away, I began to twirl my ring. For the first time, Lena noticed the nervous gesture.

"Let me see," she said. I gave her my hand and she whistled softly. "Someone paid a pretty penny for that."

"Jason," I whispered, closing my eyes briefly.

She looked at me closely. "Does your relationship go deeper than friendship?"

I met her eyes, knowing my emotion showed in the tears that brimmed in mine. "I don't know, Lena. I just know we have to find him."

Slowly Lena's fingers moved onto the ring and she closed her eyes, slipping into a light trance. For nearly thirty seconds she sat frozen, then she began to cry. Laughing softly, she hugged me. "Thank you."

As she pulled back, I asked her what she had seen.

She smiled. "A joy and youthfulness I hadn't seen for a long time in Jason when he bought the ring. He wears one that matches yours."

"Yes."

"I saw it," she said as she released my hand.

Green braked hard enough to throw Lena and I forward. We looked up to see a police car blocking the road in front of us.

"What's going on?" I demanded.

Green shrugged. "Doesn't look good."

Lena leaned forward. "Can we get around it?"

Green turned slightly and put the car in reverse. "They might be cops, but they don't work the day shift," he murmured as he began to turn the car around.

Before he had the car totally turned, a limousine blocked us from the other direction. I turned to see two black sedans pull around the police car and trap us completely. Men with guns filed out of every car. As they approached, Lena took out her car phone but before she could dial, Green told her to put it down. She did so reluctantly.

I looked back to the limousine in time to see David climb out. "Isn't he dead?" I whispered to Lena.

She followed my gaze and replied softly, "I wish he was."

David walked up and leaned on the car near Green's window. "Aren't you driving in the wrong 'hood?"

Green gave him a long slow look. "Maybe, maybe not."

The Brujah smiled wide, showing his fangs. "It's close to sunrise, boy. I'd hate to see the witch stuck outside at that time of day."

I felt my own teeth extend in reaction to his words.

Moving with the speed of his clan, David stuck his head inside Lena's window. Lena shrunk away, leaning heavily on me.

"We're trying to leave, David," I said, my voice low and calm. My right hand was on my gun, but there was no way to pull it out without being seen and I couldn't fire with Lena between us. "Let us pass."

He laughed. "You're rats deserting a sinking ship," he told us. "Leave. Don't be here at sundown, or I'll be back."

I relaxed my grip on the Glock. "We won't be."

"David, it's time to go," we heard from the limousine. I turned my head to see an older gentleman in a suite leaning out.

David smiled again. "Another time."

The man called out again. "I said now, David."

David straightened and walked to the limousine. As he got in, it drove away, clearing a path for our escape.

I looked at Green, who was sweating heavily. "We should go now," I told him.

He nodded. "I think so," he replied, but continued to look after the limousine.

"While we still can," I urged.

Green pulled away and we hurried to the airport. When we arrived, Michael's plane was waiting. I went into the rear cabin and fell to sleep as the sun came up and dreamed of Jason and Lucy.

*I saw myself back in the San Francisco shelter my father ran and had talked Jason and I into volunteering there. The shelter was crowded to overflowing with homeless people. The elderly had their lives etched on their faces. The young, some with families, held little hope in their eyes. Mothers wiped tears from children's faces with handkerchiefs that had seen better days. Fathers watched sadly as the ones they loved most stood in the food line to get a meager meal, for most the best meal they had seen in weeks.*

*I watched Jason talking to an elderly woman, helping her get situated on her cot. His long dark hair gleamed in the light, his brown eyes kind as he spoke to her in 'Martín's' light Spanish accent.*

*Jason and I had spent most of the last few months together, separating only when Graves called him away from some mission or another. I was growing very fond of him, and I was restless when he was gone. I was afraid I would come to care for him too much.*

*I heard a tiny cry and looked to see that one of the children had fallen against the wall where a group of kids played in a corner. He had a gash on his forehead that was bleeding heavily. The strong smell of blood mingled with that of unwashed bodies as his mother dashed over to see the damage. I handed the blanket I had been carrying to another girl and went through the back door of the shelter into the alley.*

*I leaned back against the building and closed my eyes. I wanted to go down the street to one of the rough bars nearby, but I had given my father my word that I wouldn't feed within a mile of the shelter. I thought perhaps Jason would take a dinner break soon and we could go a few miles down the strip.*

*I heard a quiet noise to my left and spun, a hand going inside my jacket to the pistol I always kept on me. Then I saw Lucy, a little girl of about ten that had been hanging around the shelter for the last few days.*

*"Hi," she said shyly. Lucy had large brown eyes and dark hair that hung lifelessly to her shoulders. Her mentally unbalanced mother was inside the shelter protesting, as she had every night for the week that they had been there, that Lucy wasn't her child.*

*"Hi yourself," I replied, smiling. "Are you hungry? They're serving dinner inside."*

*"No," Lucy said. "I ate just a bit ago. Are you okay? You look tired."*

*"I'm fine," I told her as she came closer. I could smell the blood within her, but it had a different smell, almost Kindred. Then I nearly laughed at myself because Kindred don't make children vampires. My bracelet twirled on my wrist and a sudden thought occurred to me; if the Kindred smell wasn't coming from Lucy, there must be others about.*

*"Lucy," I said urgently, "Go inside. Now."*

*"Why?" she asked.*

*"Something is here, something dangerous," I said, pushing her toward the door. I let my senses peak, trying to hear or see anything that might give the intruder away. From behind me, I heard a very faint noise and I turned quickly, keeping Lucy at my back.*

*A dark haired Kindred stood against a parked Trofeo dressed in jeans and a leather jacket. "How ya doin'?" he sneered.*

*"What do you care, Brujah," I said, recognizing his clan.*

*"Don't be so cool, witch," he replied, referring to my own clan. "We just wanna talk."*

*I looked around quickly, startled to see five other Kindred males, all Brujah, standing nearby. A stocky blond was leaning against the door to the shelter. My hand crept toward my gun, but I knew I couldn't take them and protect Lucy too.*

*"Let the girl go," I said sternly. "Let her inside."*

*"But she's such a pretty little girl," one with a scar on his face said, moving closer. "We wanna talk to her, too."*

*Lucy whimpered, pressing closely against my back. "Don't be afraid," I told her. "Everything will be okay."*

*"That's right, sugar," a short Brujah with a big leather jacket taunted, "Don't worry, be happy!"*

*All at once, they lunged. I tried to pull out my gun but it was too late and I was knocked to the ground before I could get it clear of the holster. I saw the dark haired Brujah grab Lucy as she tried to dart around him, one of his large hands covering her mouth to silence her. The others were all on me, holding my arms and legs. I took a breath to scream and one of them stuffed a rag in my mouth, then stuck duct tape over the lower half of my face.*

*"Not a sound," scar-face whispered in my ear.*

*Good thing I don't breathe anymore, I thought, knowing that I wouldn't have been able to. I pulled against my captors wildly, but couldn't move more than an inch. My hands were yanked roughly behind me and placed in handcuffs while my legs were shackled together. I jerked at the bonds, but they had been made for stronger Kindred than me. Four sets of hands grabbed me and carried me to the waiting car, placing me in the trunk. As the lid closed, I caught a glimpse of Lucy struggling to break free.*

*Soon I felt the car shift, heard doors slam and a motor start. The car drove away quickly and I tried to gauge its direction and distance, but it wasn't long before I was disoriented.*

*Papa was in Sacramento, but Jason would miss me soon. I had no way to get any clue to him of what had happened. Would he come after me? I thought he probably would. I hoped he would. Jason....*

# THE COUNTESS

Let it rock, let it go

You can't stop a fire burning out of control

Let it Rock - Bon Jovi

When I awoke, the plane had been in Detroit for several hours. I readied myself for the evening, then joined Lena in the main cabin. As soon as I saw her, I could tell that something was very wrong.

"What is it?" I asked.

She walked to my side and led me to a seat. "Christina, please sit down."

I looked at her closely, fear clutching my stomach; when I had asked Lena to sit in LA, it was to tell her Graves might be dead. Reluctantly, I sat.

"I spoke with Mikael this afternoon," she told me. "Do you remember the box I told you was delivered to the village? The one he wouldn't tell me what was inside?"

"Yes," I replied, twisting the ring slowly around my finger.

"Well, I talked him into telling me what it was this afternoon," she said slowly, watching me carefully. "There was a severed left hand inside the box."

I sat very still, knowing but not wanting to understand what she was saying.

"On the third finger of the hand was a wedding band," Lena continued, her words driving nails into my heart, "From the description, the ring is of the same design as yours."

For a moment I sat frozen, unable to move or speak. "Jason's ring. Jason's hand."

"It could be a trick," she said, placing a hand over mine. "They might have taken the ring from him and put it on another hand, we can't be sure—"

"No," I said, rising stiffly, "we can't. Can you get it for me?"

"Christina..."

"Can you get it for me?" I repeated harshly, then forced myself to calm down. "Can you have Mikael send it where we can get it at our next stop?"

"I will see what I can do," she replied quietly.

I walked blindly into the back cabin and leaned back against the door, holding it closed. After a time, I realized I was twisting the ring again.

Jason had smiled so sweetly when I had slipped the matching ring on his finger. I closed my eyes and tried not to picture them taking Jason's hand from him. I believed nothing short of staking or final death could have gotten my ring from me. Did he feel the same way about his? Would they have had to cut off his hand to get the ring?

A vision of Jason as I had last seen him flashed through my mind. Perhaps I was a fool to think I could save him. Slowly I slid to the floor and buried my face in my hands. Choking back the tears that filled my eyes, I struggled to believe that he was alive and that we would find him in time.

I had known fear many times in the five years that consisted of my memory, but never to the point of the sheer terror I felt now. Jason had to be alive; I had to believe that he was.

I wiped the blood tears from my cheeks and washed my face, reapplying my makeup before rejoining Lena and Green.

The waiting limousine carried us to a large estate west of Detroit. As we went up the drive, I noticed the grounds were very well maintained, with many fountains and topiaries. Then I noticed

something else as well, subtle things that marked the estate as property of the Clan Tremere. This house was definitely a Tremere Chantry.

"Lena," I murmured, "tell me again who we are meeting."

"A Countess," she replied. "She may be Kindred."

I smiled. "I'd say definitely Kindred. Tremere clan, to be exact."

"Tremere? I'm afraid I'm still not familiar with your clans."

"I am Tremere, as is Antonio. Members of the House and Clan Tremere are, for want of a better word, sorcerers," I explained. "We can do many things no other clans can do. Tremere usually choose humans with paranormal abilities to embrace. Actually with your gifts, you would be a good choice for our clan."

She shivered lightly. "I don't think so, I like my life just the way it is." She paused for a moment, then asked, "If you don't mind, would you tell me what ability you have that you were chosen for the clan?"

"I don't know."

Lena was puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"Forgive me, I thought you knew," I replied. "I don't remember anything of my life before the embrace. Whatever gifts I had were lost with my change."

"I'm sorry," she said softly.

"Don't be," I told her. "I'm not. I have a full happy life, most of the time. I have even recently been reacquainted with my father. Like you, I enjoy my life."

The driver stopped near the entry and we exited the limousine. As we approached the doors, they opened and a young woman led us inside. We entered a large arched hallway and followed the woman into a library. She asked us to sit while she informed the Countess we had arrived.

The library was cavernous with bookcases covering most of the walls and ornate paintings between them. It was elegant yet very simple.

Lena and I stood as we heard footsteps come near. A tall proud blonde woman entered and her presence filled the room so completely that I almost didn't see her companion, a young red haired woman with pretty blue eyes.

"I am Countess Victoria," the blond said to us.

Lena took a step forward and held out a hand to the Countess. "Thank you so much for your invitation," she said.

The Countess turned to me. "Christina Strong. I have heard tell of you, young lady."

I took her hand and bent to kiss the large signet ring she wore. "I am honored, Countess, and must apologize that I have not heard tell of you."

"Quite all right, my dear," she replied, turning to take a seat in a large wing chair that looked almost like a throne, "I don't mingle much outside of Venice."

I raised an eyebrow; Venice is the hub of the Tremere clan, only the best of the best are called there, or those about to die for misdeed toward the clan.

"Please, sit. I understand you may have some information about my crystal," she said.

I glanced at Lena. "Actually, we only know that a Countess had lost it."

Between us, Lena and I told the story of Jason and our search to find him. The Countess was most interested in the toilet paper roll, insisting we show her, and the fact that the Los Angeles Tremere primogen, Van Able, was missing as well. She told us that she too had been looking for Lena's Talon Graves.

Lena spoke quietly. "We believe he is in great danger."

The Countess nodded. "I was afraid of that. I usually hear from him often, but he hasn't contacted me in some time."

Lena glanced at the red-head, then asked, "Countess, do you know what someone would want with a powerful Garou, Graves, a fragment of the Book of Nod and your crystal?"

"There are many who would like to have a Kindred of Talon's power, to study or to use his vitae," she replied. "A Garou could be used for many things. As for the Book of Nod, it is very difficult to say who would want it as many search for it."

"But the crystal is very ancient and once held a significant place in time. I have safeguarded it for a long time, but Paige is more of an expert in that area." The Countess turned to the other woman.

Paige glanced at the Countess, then turned to us. "Thank you, Victoria. I'm sure you have heard of the legends of King Arthur, the sword of power he held and the great and wondrous magician Merlin. Many of the stories have changed through time and are now unexplainable, more romantic than the true history of the ancient powers and what they serve. Nevertheless, Arthur was quite real, as was Merlin."

"There is true power around us," she continued, looking directly at me, "you know this is true, you have used it. There are many locations in the world where this power can be overwhelming to those who can touch it, but it is often quite difficult to sense these places. At best there is merely a... disquiet felt in these areas, almost a flash of intuition. The Druids were but one of the peoples that were able to find them quite accurately and use them to seek harmony and strength."

"Stonehenge is an example of one of those places. Before the stones were moved, Excalibur lay in the center stone. Fate placed it there; Luther was led by the sword seeking a resting place to draw strength from."

Paige walked to the Victoria's side and rested a hand on the back of the chair. "The crystal has that kind of power, it can draw and store energy like a battery. It is believed to have been taken from Stonehenge thousands of years ago and has been prized for its inherent properties ever since. But it must be in one of the earth's places of power to be truly effective."

"Is there a place of power near Moscow?" I asked her, surreptitiously twisting my ring.

"That is an unknown, western Kindred know little of that area," she replied. "But many powerful werewolves can sense the places of power, they have ties to mother earth that make finding them easier."

"The crystal disappeared on the fifth of this month," the Countess said.

Lena and I looked at each other; the last concert date from the envelope was November fifth, in Detroit.

Lena turned to the other women. "Do either of you know Peiter Van Able?"

Victoria stiffened. "I don't know him well, but I don't trust him at all. He asks too many questions for his own ends. He is a disgrace to the Clan Tremere."

"Did he know you had the crystal?" I asked.

"Yes," she said thoughtfully. "He tried to meet with me once to speak of it, but I would not see him."

Softly, Lena asked, "When did you last see Talon?"

The Countess thought a moment. "About a month ago. He brought me a recording from Europe and we listened to it together and talked most of the night. It was a most enjoyable evening."

"What did you speak of?" Lena persisted.

"The usual things, childe," The Countess replied vaguely.

"Did he say where he had been or was going?" I asked.

"Not where he was going, no," she said, "but he did say he had been traveling in Europe for a time. The recording he brought me was from a collector in London.

"But we digress," Victoria stated. She looked at me meaningfully. "If you come across the crystal in your search, I could make it well worth your while in the clan if you returned it to me."

Briefly, I entertained the idea that the crystal Jason had given me was the Countess' crystal but dismissed the idea quickly. Why would Jason give me a crystal of such power? Why wouldn't he have used it to fight the mage?

"Milady," I said simply, "that would not be necessary. I am searching for a man, not for power. It would be an honor to me if I could return your crystal to you."

She studied me in such a way that I felt she knew my soul. "You are not looking for Talon," she said softly, "who is it you search for?"

I looked down at my hands. The ring glittered brightly in the firelight. "Just a man, milady, a mortal. One who has risked much for me. I owe him a great deal."

She smiled. "One does not give love to repay a debt, Christina."

Startled, I met her eye. "I don't know what love is or how it feels, milady. I only know he would find me if our situations were reversed, and has."

Paige laid a hand on Victoria's shoulder. "Perhaps our guests are hungry, Countess."

"Ah, I had forgotten," Victoria said, rising. "Lady Stockton, I have an excellent chef in the kitchens who will prepare anything you desire. Christina, if you will accompany Paige, she will escort you about the grounds where you may feed wherever you wish. You look a bit low, be sure to feed well."

"Our thanks, milady," I replied.

"I would like to speak with you both further," she said walking to the doorway, "when you have eaten. I understand you have the Sight, Lady Stockton, I am very interested in hearing more about that."

Lena nodded.

"I am also interested in learning more about you, Christina. I understand your studies have gone quite well. From what I hear Antonio made an excellent choice when he adopted you as his childe." With that, she was gone.

Paige led me outside and we walked about the property, talking quietly. She asked if I had any preference for my feeding stock, and I asked for females. I was not going to make the mistake of 'kissing' anyone even remotely like Jason, it had hurt too badly in LA.

When my hunger was sated, I asked to have a few minutes alone to make some phone calls. Paige led me to the room I would sleep in the next day and made sure I knew my way back to the library.

The dream I'd had the day before was fresh in my mind and I thought I knew someone who could help Michael and Antonio. I called Brenda to get the number and she answered the phone distantly, as if she were distracted.

"How are you doing?" I asked.

"Fine, how was your stay in LA?"

"Illuminating," I told her. "I saw our mutual friends."

"How is Antonio?" She paused a moment, then added, "and Michael?"



"He's having a few ups and downs," I said softly. "He wanted me to tell you he thinks of you."

"Is he well?"

"He is... busy," I replied.

She moaned softly. "What now?"

"Oh, you know, the usual," I forced a laugh, hoping she would think me joking, "dead primogens, an attempted coup, murders, the things Michael and Antonio really enjoy getting their claws into."

Brenda laughed. "Well, if that's all they're into...."

"Actually, the reason I called is because I thought you might know the phone number of the prince's home in Flint."

"Oh?" She was surprised.

"We're in Detroit right now and I thought I would say hello to Lucy," I explained.

"That little bitch."

"What's the matter, Brenda," I asked, amused at her venom, "don't like surprises?"

She laughed. "I'd like to surprise her."

I couldn't help but laugh with Brenda. "Do you have the number?"

She gave it to me and we said our good-byes, each promising to keep in touch.

I called the number she gave me right away, but the man who answered the phone said he didn't recognize Lucy's name. I left a message for the prince, saying I was a friend of Lucy's and needed to speak with her right away.

Lena and I spent several hours talking with Victoria and Paige. The Countess tested Lena's psychometric abilities with several items, including a painting she said was a gift from a friend. Lena was able to tell that Talon had won it in a duel then brought it to America as a birthday present for Victoria.

While the Countess was testing Lena, my cell phone rang and I excused myself to answer it in the hallway. It was Lucy.

"I've heard some rather interesting things about you lately, my dear," I told her.

"What kind of things?" she asked in her little girl's voice.

"Your blood line," I said, then added warmly, "and your visits to amusement parks."

She laughed. "Surely amusement parks are perfectly normal for a girl my age."

"Actually, it was the company you kept," I replied, "without his suit."

"Yes, well, one can't work all the time."

My voice went grave. "Actually, it is about the suit that I am calling."

"How is Michael?" By the tone of her voice, she really cared. That was good.

"Not well," I said slowly, "he's involved in some politics in LA that are getting pretty hairy."

She was silent for a moment, then, "Who's he with?"

"The prince," I told her.

"Do you have a way to contact him?" she demanded, suddenly not sounding much like a child. That was not so good.

"I can reach him."

"Tell him to get out of LA," she said flatly. "I can't be of any help to him."

That statement told me that there was another Assamite in LA, one not on the prince's side. *Very* not good. "I think he's in too deep to walk away."

"I wish I could help," she whispered, "but there are rules...."

Things were worse than I had thought in LA. I hoped Michael and Antonio would be okay. "I understand," I told her.

"How is the other friend of yours doing?" she asked suddenly. "Is he there with you?"

I spoke carefully. "Actually, 'Martín' and I were traveling in Europe when we were rather forcibly separated in Italy."

"Forcibly?"

I gazed down at my ring. "As in 'against our will.' I'm working on getting him back now."

"Who has him?" she asked.

I closed my eyes to block the diamond's sparkle, but the weight of the ring wouldn't let me forget it was there. "A mage, I think. I have reason to believe he's in Moscow."

Lucy thought for a moment. "Perhaps I have some people I could talk to. Where are you now?"

"I am in Detroit, actually. I will be here for the night."

"I'll call you before dawn," she promised, then rang off.

When I returned to the library, the Countess started in on me. She wanted to know everything about everything I knew, what I dreamed about, what I remembered about being mortal. I told her how Antonio had found me and taught me how to be Tremere.

An hour before dawn Victoria allowed us to retreat to our rooms. I bathed in a large tub in the bathroom attached to mine. While I was brushing out my long dark hair, my cell phone rang again.

"Hello?"

"Christina." It was Lucy. "Look, I talked to a few people tonight."

"And...."

"One was an associate of Michael. He's leaving LA."

I nodded to myself. "Going to Mexico. He'll be back."

Lucy paused. "That's Sabbath territory. Pretty tough customers."

"He's been there before," I told her. "Just his style."

She giggled. "This Burkoff I spoke with wanted me to let you know he was sending you a package. You should have it by sundown tomorrow."

"Great." That would be our aliases.

"I have some information that may help you find your friend," she told me. "Can you come to Flint tomorrow night?"

Another delay, but if she could help.... "It shouldn't be a problem."

"You don't—" her voice broke slightly, "You don't have Brenda or Antonio with you, do you?"

"No," I reassured her, "but I do have another woman with me. Mortal."

"Not a problem. Just don't tell her...."

"I won't."

Lucy gave me directions and I told her we would be there about an hour after sunset. After I hung up, I went to Lena's room and let her know about the package and the change of plans. She agreed to arrange for the side trip and we said goodnight.

# FLINT

Every damn day we're under pressure  
About to lose it, lose my mind  
Loosen Up - Winger

The next evening I was up at sundown. I got dressed in a formfitting black pantsuit and a black jacket. I made sure my weapons were fully loaded and went to find Lena. When I reached the foyer, a woman approached.

"Sister," she said to me, "There is a package in the Carriage House for you and the mortal." The woman wore a decorative pin on her lapel that told me she was Tremere.

"For both of us?" I asked. When she nodded, I suggested we find Lena before opening it.

"Why is it in the Carriage House?" Lena asked when we located her in the Library.

"It is a rather large crate," the woman replied, "we weren't sure if we should secure it."

Lena and I looked at each other questioningly. "All right," I joked, "who'd he send us?"

As we followed the vampire to the back of the house and across the drive, Lena told me about a voice mail message she'd retrieved from the holding. The same Russian she had spoken with had called and complimented her on the use of her 'wolf friends.' Then he had asked if she'd gotten his message, referring, Lena believed, to the package Mikael had opened. Lena seemed to be angry rather than frightened at the Russian's tricks.

The crate was large, nearly eight feet long, three feet wide and three feet high. It almost resembled a coffin, but seemed to be made from a high-density polymer and had metal strips holding it closed. It took us a few minutes to figure out how to open it, and when we lifted off the lid, Luke sat up, brushing off his suit.

"I was wondering how long it would take you guys to open that," Luke grumbled.

"It's not that far past nightfall," I told him, unable to stop the rush of pleasure I felt at seeing him. "And we had no idea you were in there."

"What are you doing here?" Lena asked. "I thought you were supposed to stay in LA."

"I was," he replied.

"And..." I said, crossing my arms.

He looked between the two of us for a moment. "You ladies didn't think I would let you handle this on your own, did you?" he stated, stepping out of the box and reaching back inside for an aluminum briefcase and a large duffel bag.

Then he turned and looked me straight in the eye. "You need me."

I returned his look with a level one of my own. I did need him. I had to wonder about his reasons for leaving LA given the problems there, but I did need him. More importantly, Jason needed him. And despite everything, I really was glad he was there. I took the briefcase and linked arms with him, and we walked toward the waiting car.

"We're headed for a pit stop in Flint," I told him.

"I thought we were going to Moscow?" Luke said.

"We are," I replied, "after a brief stop in Flint. There is someone there I must speak to."

We walked over to the waiting car, but before getting in, I took our escort aside. "Can you arrange for our things to be sent to the plane? Everything is packed, it just needs to be taken to the airport."

She agreed and I thanked her for her help. I got into the car to see Lena had opened an envelope and was studying our new profiles.

I was to be Katherine "Katie Jo" Jackson, a Senator's daughter from Mobile, Alabama. Lena would be Catarina Baldwin, my father's aide. She would be keeping an eye on my boyfriend, Tom Cutter, and me. Luke would be Tom, a college and army dropout that Katie Joe was dating in order to rebel against her father. We would be staying with a NATO group at the American Embassy in Moscow. I shook my head, knowing that if nothing else, it would be an interesting trip.

An hour later we arrived at Stuart Williams' house in Flint. Stuart, from what I'd heard, was a fair and just prince, if a little hard. Lucy was his enforcer.

We were escorted to the den where there was quite an impressive collection of books. The room whispered of money and distinction, and was quite tastefully done. About ten minutes later, Lucy quietly opened the door and stood watching us shyly.

After a moment, she cried my name and dashed across the floor to land in my outstretched arms. I hugged her close to me for a moment, savoring her childlike scent and form. I had been so worried for her when we were in the dungeon together; it was good to see she really was all right. Lucy was the closest thing to a child I would ever have, even if she were much older than I was.

Lucy pulled back and leaned against my side as I rose. She wrapped an arm around my leg and looked at my friends timidly.

"Lucy," I said, "These are my friends Luke and Lena. They are helping me find 'Martín.'" "

She looked up at me with her big brown eyes. "Is he gonna be all right?"

I nodded. "We will find him."

She glanced at the others, then half-whispered to me, "Can I talk to you alone?"

I looked at Luke and Lena. "Can you give us a minute, please?"

When the door had shut behind them, Lucy dropped her little girl act. It was startling to see such a serious look from a child of ten, even more so because this was the first time I had seen the transition. Actually, this was the first time I'd seen Lucy and known she was Kindred.

Lucy pulled out an envelope and handed it to me. Immediately I noticed the handwriting on the outside was Jason's. It was postmarked in London on November seventh.

"When did you get this?" I asked.

"Two days ago," she said softly, watching me closely. "Read it, it might help."

I pulled out the letter and again saw that it was indeed Jason's writing. When I read the letter, it made no sense to me. A few phrases caught my eye. 'Sorry to say I couldn't stay in Kansas any more. I'm going to visit the fuzzy centipede. He's good at finding places to hide while looking under rocks, or for them.... The puppy you adopted has gone to see Angel. It's been hot where he's going, but the dog likes the heat.'

"What does this mean?" I asked.

"It's in our secret code," she told me, "Kansas is our term for the US. If he couldn't stay there, I know he's leaving the country. I called some friends and found out that the fuzzy centipede is Dr. Centopolis. He's a scientist living in Moscow. But I don't understand why he wants to go rock collecting."

"I do." When she shot me a questioning look, I added, "Clan matter."

"Oh," she replied in understanding. "My puppy is Michael and Angel is Los Angeles. Hot means there's trouble there, and we know Michael likes trouble."

"Yes." I re-read the letter and noticed another line. 'My kitten is doing better; she is drinking her milk, but doesn't sleep all day. She's going with me to see the centipede.'

I fought back the tears and felt Lucy take the note from me and grasp my hands. I looked at her and she started to say something, but felt the ring I wore and looked at it. Slowly she raised her eyes to mine questioningly.

"Martín' and I were travelling as man and wife. He wanted me to see the monastery where he was raised, but the mage came—" I broke off, fighting tears. "I have to find him," I said, struggling to regain control.

"Christina," she whispered and hugged me tightly. As she pulled away, I caught sight of her tearstained face before she ran quickly out the door past a startled Luke and Lena.

I turned away from the door and dabbed at my eyes with a handkerchief.

"Christina," Lena asked from the hall, "are you okay?"

"I'm fine," I told her, turning and walking to her side. "We need to—"

A rich vibrant voice cut through my words. "I hope you aren't planning on leaving my city before introducing yourselves to me."

I turned to see a tall nearly bald man who looked to be in his late fifties. He was very attractive for an older man, and his voice with its English accent made me long to hear it from a stage, perhaps reciting Shakespeare. I knew instantly that he was Stuart Williams.

"My prince," I murmured, bowing before him.

"And you are...." he near demanded in that enchanting voice.

"Christina Strong, sire. I came to see Lucy."

"Yes," he replied smoothly, "I had word of your arrival from Detroit." Stuart looked pointedly at the others.

"This is Luke Thomas, sire, from Los Angeles, and Lady Lena Stockton from Austria," I told him quickly. "They are assisting me in finding a friend."

"Ah, yes," he drawled. "The friend little Lucy speaks so highly of. Is there anything I can do to be of assistance to you in your search?"

When I glanced at Lena, she said, "Actually, my prince, we need to have some money exchanged for rubbles. Is there anyone in town who could help us?"

He turned and stood staring silently down the hall. A moment later, a tall dark immaculately groomed Kindred entered. His hair and beard were trimmed so precisely that he looked as if he'd just exited a barbershop. I had trouble reading his aura; magic seemed to surround him. Was he disguising himself? Was he perhaps Nosferatu?

"Number One," the prince called as the man walked to his side with very precise movements. "These friends have need of an exchange, could you handle this for me?"

Number One bowed slightly. "Yes, sir." He then looked questioningly at us.

Lena pulled a stack of bills out of her large purse. "I need ten thousand American dollars exchanged for Russian. We'll need large and small denomination bills."

Number One took the money from her, studying her intently.

"I have heard much about this friend of Lucy's," Stuart told me, "It seems I have heard eight different rumors from as many sources."

"They are all true, my prince," I answered, smiling slightly, again fighting for control. Luke took a step toward me, but I shook my head at him and turned away.

Stuart looked quickly at his companion. "One of yours?"

The man almost looked offended. "No, sir," he said, then turned and quickly walked away.

The prince looked back at me and saw my struggle. He took a few steps toward me and I felt the sadness abate, replaced with awe for this man. I felt at that moment that he was the greatest man in the world, that he could do anything. It was as if a switch had been turned in my mind and I knew he was using his powers on me, but that didn't change how I felt. In that moment, I adored him.

"Rest easy, my childe," he told me, his deep voice sending chills down my spine, "Trust in yourself and your friends and you will get through this."

And suddenly, I did. I knew we could find Jason. We were well prepared, we had contacts and money and plenty of ammunition. We would find him and save him.

The prince stepped back and the awe I felt for him retreated to a corner of my mind. As Stuart led us back into the den, I glanced at Luke and Lena; they looked a little stunned and I knew they had felt it too.

Stuart offered us tea while we waited, and we agreed. He was charming and funny, taking our minds off our quest.

As we waited for Stuart's man to return, I noticed that Luke kept a close eye on me. Thinking back, I realized that he always had. It comforted me to know that he cared so much about me, but saddened me as I believed our chance to be together had passed.

Number One returned almost exactly an hour later with a large envelope that he handed to Lena. As she accepted it, I turned to the prince.

"You have been most generous, sire, with your time and your assistance," I told him, bending to kiss his hand. "You have our gratitude."

"I wish you great luck on your journey, my dear," he said, his rich voice like honey.

After Luke and Lena had paid their respects, we headed to the car. Lena asked us to stop at a store for food, and afterwards I thought Luke and I might want to stop also. There was a small bar down the street from the store and the two of us went in briefly. Luke was able to quickly find a snack, while I wasn't so lucky.

Green called to let us know the plane had arrived, so we left the bar to go to the airport. We boarded the plane and settled in for takeoff.

Michael's plane was lavish, and this was the first chance I'd had to really look around. The window shades didn't open, but everything else worked wonderfully. Near the back of the plane was a spacious bedroom complete with a large bathroom. A galley at the rear held a large quantity of food for Lena.

The main cabin was quite large considering the size of the plane. It had wide comfortable seats along both exterior walls and a projection television pointing toward the cockpit. At the back of the cabin was a bookcase and wet bar. There were magazine racks at intervals between the seats, and overhead storage compartments held pillows, blankets, and carry-on luggage.

After Green had cleared the use of cellular phones, I called my Las Vegas apartment to check my messages for the first time since I had left home to meet Jason in San Francisco. What I heard chilled me to the bone.

"Christina...." The speaker was obviously in great pain. "Christina...." It was Jason! Abruptly he was cut off by a Russian voice screaming at him in the background. The line went dead.

Through my tears, I pushed the necessary number combination to save the message. Great sobs tore through my body and I covered my eyes with one hand, clutching the phone to my breast.

Luke was at my side in an instant and gathered me into his arms. I turned my head into his shoulder and cried harder.

"What is it?" Lena asked, kneeling in front of my seat.

For several minutes I couldn't control my tears enough to answer. Luke held me tightly, his arms giving me meager solace in my agony. After a time, I was able to explain that I had checked my messages and Jason's voice was on my machine.

Lena asked me for the number and the code to check the messages herself and, still crying, I pulled away from Luke's shoulder long enough to tell her.

I began to quiet as I listened to Lena dialing and turned my head slightly to watch her face. Tears filled her eyes as she listened to Jason's voice and anger burned in them at hearing the Russian's screams and the dial tone. Then she frowned.

"There's another message," she told me.

I straightened away from Luke and waited.

Lena stood, turning away from us. After a moment, she pressed a few buttons and hung up the phone but continued to look away.

"What is it?" I asked, still crying.

She glanced back at me and sighed. "I'll tell you about it later. You need to calm—"

"Tell me," I urged.

"Christina," she said kindly, "I don't think you are in any shape to—"

"Tell me what was on the message," I demanded harshly.

"Not now, you're too upset. Maybe later—"

I stood and held out my hand. "Give me the phone."

Reluctantly she gave it to me. "All right, but I still think you should wait until later to hear it. After you've calmed down."

I wasn't paying any attention to her as I had dialed the number and was already listening agonized to the first message. I closed my eyes as I heard Jason's voice calling for me. This time I listened carefully to the Russian telling Jason to hang up the phone; Lena's lessons had apparently gotten through because I could understand every word. Then the next message was playing. My hands began to shake as I listened, and I felt my teeth extend of their own volition.

"You think your friend is so smart to get to this phone. He's not so smart. We don't know who he works for, CIA, NSA or what else, but we will find out. And even if he could get back to this phone, he won't be able to dial it again."

My hand tightened on the cell phone as I listened for the time and date stamp; the phone's plastic case creaked in my grasp as I realized the message had been left five days ago, the day I'd slept at the holding, and nearly an hour after the first message. All I could think was that I had been sleeping safely when they'd cut off Jason's hand.

I screamed in mindless fury and threw the phone across the cabin. Luke immediately moved away from me, and when Lena would have gone to my side, he pulled her back as well.

Rage swept through me, erasing every thought but one; I was going to kill the bastard that had hurt Jason. I emptied an overhead storage area by throwing its contents about the room. I screamed again as I picked up a pile of magazines and ripped the stack in half, whipping them into the air behind me. I pulled on seats, but they were well secured and didn't budge, so I punched at them. I continued screaming while I grabbed books from the shelf and threw them as well, then hit at the wall when the books were gone.

After a few minutes of hitting the wall, I saw blood on the wallpaper where my left hand connected. I stopped and looked at my hand, seeing that the ring had cut deeply into my finger and that blood now covered the band. As I raised the injury to my lips, I kept hearing Jason's voice calling for me, over and over. Slowly I sank to my knees and began to cry softly.

Luke released Lena and she came to my side while Luke began picking up the mess littering the cabin floor. Lena helped me to a chair and wrapped a blanket around me before sitting at my side and comforting me silently.

Some time later dawn came and I slid into its welcoming slumber, but I could still hear the pain in Jason's voice as he called out for me and received no reply.



# MOSCOW

The winter here is cold and bitter  
And it's chilled us to the bone  
Full of Grace - Sarah McLachlan

When we woke, we were a half-hour from the Rheinmance US Air Force Base in West Germany. We assumed our new identities, Lena putting her hair up in a tight bun and dressing in a feminine business suit. I inserted the contact lenses that changed my green eyes to deep blue and put on a low cut dress of bright teal. I reluctantly removed my ring and pinned it in a small bag between my breasts. Luke changed into leather and denim and pulled his long blonde hair into a ponytail, looking more comfortable than I'd seen him since we'd been in San Francisco together nearly three months before.

As we exited the plane, Lt. Jon Wagner was there to meet us.

"Katherine Jackson?" He asked, looking between Lena and me.

"Please," I drawled using a deep southern accent, "Call me Katie Jo." I held out my hand for him to take and he did, giving me balance as I took the last few steps to the ground.

"This is Tommy Cutter, a very good friend of mine," I said, laying a hand on Luke's arm. "And this is Catarina, one of my father's aides and my chaperone for this trip."

Lena looked vaguely annoyed at my description of her, and shook the man's hand. "Lieutenant," she said briskly.

Lt. Wagner looked disapprovingly at Luke and reluctantly held out his hand. "Mr. Cutter."

"Sir," Luke replied.

"Ms. Jackson, your plane is ready for immediate take off at the next gate," Lt. Wagner said, gesturing toward a plane waiting nearby.

"Actually, Lieutenant," I said softly, releasing Luke to take the lieutenant's arm, "I have the need to powder my nose in a ladies room that is not moving constantly." I batted my eyes and pouted slightly. "Could you please escort me to the nearest facility?"

Lt. Wagner cleared his throat slightly, glancing down at my cleavage. "Of course not, ma'am."

As he led me away, Lena called out, "We'll meet you by the plane." Exasperation was quite evident in her tone.

"My, how you men look in uniforms," I said as Lt. Wagner led me to the terminal. "I would never believe that the US Air Force could have so many fine looking young men."

"Yes, well, we do try to look our best, ma'am," he replied.

"Katie Jo, please," I insisted.

"Katie Jo." He glanced down at my upturned face, then opened a door for me. "And you must call me Jon."

"Jon. You know, Daddy will be so please when I tell him how wonderfully I've been treated," I said.

"I met your father once," he told me. "The senator is well respected here among the personnel."

"Daddy always did like planes." I smiled up at him coyishly.

"You are modest, Katie Jo," Jon said, mildly surprised. "Your father was the most decorated pilot to fly his way out of Viet Nam."

Really. That hadn't been in the profile Burkoff had sent us. "My mama always told me that modesty is the greatest attribute a lady could show to the world," I replied.

"Do you always do what your mama says?" He asked, coming to a stop before a door marked 'Women.'

"Not always," I told him coyly. "But enough to know how to behave with a handsome young lieutenant. Now, if you will excuse me...." I turned and entered the rest room.

After a quick touch up of my lipstick, I threw back my head and screamed. In an instant, Jon was inside, his pistol drawn.

"What is it?" he demanded.

"A spider," I cried, pointing to a corner. "Over there, a big spider!"

He put his weapon away and walked to where I had pointed. "I don't see anything, Ms. Jackson."

"It was there, I swear it," I said imploringly, pushing the southern belle act to its limits as I edged over to the exit door and locked it. Then I stepped up behind him quietly.

As he turned, I collapsed helplessly in his arms.

"I'm just terrified of spiders," I told him, sobbing into his collar. "Cousin Bobby put one on me in grade school and now if I just see one, I fall apart."

"It's okay, Katie Jo," he said, his arms tightening around me.

I turned my head and pierced his neck with my sharp canines. He jumped, then relaxed, his hands spreading out on my back. After a moment, I had what I needed and quickly licked the wound closed.

"I know you'll protect me," I said, pulling back to look into his eyes. "I can *forget* about that silly ol' spider."

Jon looked confused for a moment, then I heard the doorknob turn behind me. A fist fell on the door and I hurried to unlock it.

Three large men with big machine guns at the ready stood just outside the door.

"What's going on in here, Lieutenant?" the major asked, his uniform proudly proclaiming him a member of the Marine Corps.

"I—" Jon sputtered, still slightly dazed.

"Jon was kind enough to kill a nasty spider for me, major," I said breathlessly. "I was scared to death, but he was very brave."

Jon moved to my side. "A spider, yes."

"Lieutenant, Miss Jackson is required to be on that plane within five minutes," the major spit out harshly. "Do you think you can handle that?"

"Yes, sir," Jon said, saluting smartly. He held his arm out for me and the Marines led the way down the hall.

We met Luke and Lena at the plane and the major informed us that we would arrive in Moscow at dawn.

"At dawn," I exclaimed, "Why, my momma always told me to avoid the sun. I get horrible hives!" I looked to the major. "Isn't there some way we could arrive at the embassy before dawn?"

"If you keep delaying us," he told me, "we won't get there until noon." He shot a disparaging look at Jon. "Although, maybe you weren't the delayer."

"I do believe killing that spider was a noble thing to do," I told the major, "even if it did delay us. Why, that thing must have been this—"

"Katherine," Lena said sternly, "Get on the plane and let these men do their jobs."

I shot her what I hoped was a scathing glance. "It's not every day I get to talk to such fine looking boys. I don't know why you always have to be a fuddy duddy."

With that, I stomped up the steps and into the plane. Lena followed more slowly, while the marines cut off Luke, forcing him to enter last. I noticed that two of the men detained Luke at the back of the plane for a few minutes while the major tried to distract me by showing me the cockpit. Smiling, I allowed it.

We took off quickly, and I worked on convincing the major that we had to disembark well before dawn. I knew if we didn't, we would have a hard time explaining why we couldn't stay awake, not to mention the fireworks that would happen if Luke and I got caught in the sunlight.

Fortunately, we arrived in Moscow with just enough time to reach the embassy and be shown our rooms before dawn overcame us. Luke and I were shown a room we would share and he offered me the bed while he took the couch.

We hoped that morning to find Jason quickly. Our assumed identities only gave us a two-week window in Moscow and we were confident that he would be located within a few days.

We were wrong.

We awoke the next evening and the first thing I did was to check the messages on the machine in my apartment, but there was nothing on it. Luke and I got ready for the evening, dressing similarly in black jeans and T-shirts. Lena came into our room a shortly thereafter and we all went down to see Dr. Centopolis, who, we found out, lived at the embassy.

Lena told the doctor a story about meeting Jason at a class she had taken in college through Dr. Valkenburg at a monastery in Italy. The senator had heard about Jason and asked her to try and find him while she was traveling through Europe with me, the senator's daughter. Apparently, a council was being called in Washington D.C. regarding religion in public schools and Jason's knowledge of religion was greatly needed.

The good doctor, unfortunately, couldn't help us very much. He hadn't seen or heard from Jason in several months. The best he could do was to give us the name of a club Jason had been known to frequent on his trips into Moscow. We thanked him for his time and left the embassy.

Lena went to meet Mikael at his hotel while Luke and I decided to walk through an historic part of town to the club. Luke thought we had been followed earlier, and we wanted to see if it was true. He held my hand and I told myself I had to let him to keep our cover story intact. However, my mind was on Jason.

As we entered the square that housed Lenin's Flame, I began to feel strange. The closer we got to the flame, the worse I felt. When we got within a hundred feet of the memorial, I stumbled and clutched at Luke's hand to keep from falling.

"Katie Jo," Luke asked anxiously, "are you all right?"

I straightened as much as I could and nodded. "I'm not feeling very well."

I took a step forward and waves of nausea washed over me. I hadn't felt this way since Antonio had taught me how to eat food. Again I sagged against Luke to keep from falling, and he swung me into his arms. I tried weakly to pull away, but he wouldn't let me. He turned and walked back the way we had come.

As Luke carried me, I began to feel better. The further from the flame he moved, the better I felt. He stopped and asked me what was wrong.

"For a minute there I thought I was going to throw up," I told him. He looked down at me strangely, then back at the flame.

"You're probably going to hate me for this," he said, and turned to walk back toward the monument.

Again I felt the nausea sweep over me and began to struggle with him, asking him several times to put me down. As we got closer, I grew weaker until I begged him to stop and finally he did.

"How bad?" he asked.

"Please," I whispered, laying my head weakly on his shoulder, "get me out of here."

Quickly Luke strode out of the square and by the time we had reached a main road, I felt well enough to ask him to put me down.

As he did so, he asked, "Didn't you say Jason gave you a gem of some kind?"

I swept my hair back from my face. "Yeah, kind of a crystal, why?"

"What did you do with it?"

"I—" The lights went on somewhere in my mind. I smiled. "I swallowed it."

Luke grinned back at me. "The Countess' crystal."

We hailed a cab and went back to the embassy.

Luke's idea, which understandably I didn't agree to, was for him to cut into my stomach to get the crystal out. I did try to make myself vomit, but the crystal seemed to have lodged itself in my body and would not come up.

Finally I remembered a rite of cleansing that Antonio had taught me soon after he'd adopted me. The rite required that I sit naked inside a circle of sharp stones and recite the ritual for ten minutes. I was to wear nothing, not even jewelry to perform the rite, so I had to have Luke break my bracelet; it was the only way to remove it. This was the first time I'd ever removed the bracelet, and I dismissed the brief flash of light the chain gave as it broke to my imagination.

Luke stepped out of the room and I took off my clothing, folding them neatly on the bed. I sat carefully within the circle of stones we had found and began reciting the ritual. As I spoke the words of magic, I could feel the crystal begin to move through my flesh. When the ritual was complete, the crystal lay before me on the floor amid the gray ash that encircled me.

I quickly dressed myself and opened the door to let Luke back in. We decided the best thing to do with the crystal would be for me to insert it just under the skin of my left forearm, making it completely concealed but totally accessible. We had just finished doing so when Lena returned, pulling a cart with luggage that I quickly recognized piled on top of it.

She told us she had met up with Mikael and their friend Kyle at their hotel room. They had visited the monastery before traveling to Moscow and had retrieved Jason's and my luggage. I thanked her, grateful to have both my things and those that were Jason's back with me.

I made myself wait before going through the bags, filling Lena in quickly about the crystal, and asking her where the ring was. For the first time I noticed how pale she was.

I walked over to her and took her hand, leading her to the bed so she could sit down. "What's wrong?" I asked softly, crouching in front of her.

"I saw the hand," she said softly, "and when I touched it..."

"Tell me," I said gently, seeing how difficult this was for her.

"I had a vision," she whispered, tears filling her eyes. "I saw him dial a telephone, heard him call for you, Christina. I saw them come and take him away and I saw—" She stopped, fighting for control. I didn't have to ask whom she meant. "I saw them cut off his hand."

"You're sure?" Luke said, coming to stand by the bed.

"I saw an arm," she replied, "The sleeve was the same as the shirt I saw him wearing when he called you. His ring was on the hand when they took it." She watched me carefully, waiting for my reaction.

I looked up at her, searching her face for some sign of uncertainty about what she'd seen, but there was no doubt on her face. She took my hand and placed Jason's ring in it, closing my fingers over it before letting go.

Slowly I opened my hand and looked down at the ring in my palm. Rivers of tears began to flow from my eyes when I saw that blood filled the crevasses in its leafed design. Silently I let the rage rise within me. How dare they do this to Jason?

I stood and saw only red before my eyes. Dimly I realized that Luke had pulled Lena out of my way as I moved toward the bed, still clutching Jason's ring in my hand.

Luke grabbed my wrists and said sternly, "You are supposed to be a Senator's daughter, Christina. How will we explain a hole in the embassy?"

My hands shook violently in Luke's grasp and I willed myself to calm down. I pulled my hands away and walked to the dresser. I slipped Jason's ring into the bag I kept mine in and began to change, not caring that Luke was still in the room. I pinned the bag inside my blouse over my heart.

Luke accompanied me as I left the embassy to walk the streets of Moscow only because he flatly refused to let me go alone. When we returned near dawn, I only glanced at the baggage, unwilling to go through it just yet. Luke and I both fell into an exhausted sleep as the sun came up.

# SEARCHING

Love is in the water love is in the air  
Show me where to go tell me will love be there  
Shine - Collective Soul

The next evening when the taxi stopped in front of the club Dr. Centopolis had recommended, Luke stepped out and turned to offer me his hand. Reluctantly I took it, but as soon as I gained the curb, I slid my hand out of his. Luke turned and offered to help Lena out, and they both joined me on the sidewalk.

Luke stepped close to my side, his broad shoulders brushing mine. I shifted slightly to break the contact and led the way inside.

We found a corner table and Luke pulled out my chair. I sat silently, still brooding over the hand and the ring. After holding Lena's chair, Luke slid his close to mine and sat down. I moved my seat over a bit to give him more room.

Luke ordered a round of drinks for us, but my mind wasn't on the club. I was thinking of Jason and remembering the kiss he'd given me before going to fight the crone.

I jerked slightly when Luke snapped his fingers in front of my face.

"Anyone home?" he asked, smiling.

I gave him a small smile in return and took a sip of my drink. I felt cold and knew that no amount of coffee could warm the chill inside me.

Luke looked out at the dance floor, then turned back to me. "Would you like to dance?"

I shook my head slightly, looking down into my glass.

A few minutes later Lena asked me to go to the ladies room with her. She seemed to want to talk to me without Luke overhearing so I went. The room had several women in it when we entered, but after a few minutes we were alone.

Lena pulled out her lipstick and began to apply it. "Don't you think you should be a little more... happening with Luke?" she asked casually.

"What do you mean?" I replied, leaning against the sink and watching her powder her nose.

"Well, you are supposed to be this wonderful couple, breaking your Daddy's heart with this boy." She watched my face carefully.

I wasn't sure what she was asking me to do. "You want me to..."

"Touch Luke. Hold hands, kiss, grope even." She smiled. "Everyone in the embassy knows you are supposed to be lovers. Grab his butt."

I was, to put it simply, shocked to hear Lena talk like that. It hadn't occurred to me that we would have to go that far in our charade. I turned to look in the mirror and saw what Lena saw. There were shadows in my eyes and I looked as if my best friend had died. I refused to think that maybe he had.

"You know, this is our cover, our only chance of finding him in Moscow." She pulled a brush from her purse and began to run it through her hair.

I met her eye in the mirror. "I know."

She nodded. "Let's go back then."

I closed my eyes briefly. "Wait," I told her, and pulled my own lipstick from my purse. I flipped my head down and ran my fingers through my hair, mussing it. When I stood, it floated around my head like a dark cloud. If I was supposed to be a southern belle, I'd better start acting like one.

When we returned to the table, a slow ballad began playing. Couples covered the dance floor, each swaying in their own private rhythm. As Lena sat down, I held a hand out to Luke and he glanced up at me in surprise, then leaned over to look behind me.

"What?" he asked, preoccupied with whatever it was he saw.

"Don't you want to dance, sugar?" I asked with laughter in my eyes.

He glanced at my face, confused.

I waved my hand in front of his face. "Music. Dance."

He shrugged and took my hand. "Sure," he said as he stood. I didn't move back, and our bodies touched lightly. Again he glanced behind me.

"What is it?" I asked.

"There is a guy behind you that I have seen a couple of times since we've been in Moscow," he said looking intently over my shoulder.

"Let's go dance and I'll check it out." I pulled him toward the dance floor and he followed meekly.

I turned and Luke put his hands on my waist. Slowly I made myself put my arms up around his neck and move my body closer to his, agonizing with every movement that he was not Jason. Images of dancing with Jason in San Francisco flashed in my mind and I closed my eyes for a moment, lost in the past.

Gradually Luke's hands moved around my back, pulling me closer still. Soon we were pressed together as if we were indeed lovers. I told myself I was doing this for Jason and forced myself to relax.

"What did you two talk about in the bathroom?" Luke whispered into my hair.

"Lena simply pointed out that I wasn't acting appropriately for our cover." I laid my cheek on Luke's shoulder with my face turned away from him, fighting my memories of Jason.

I looked to where a dark haired man stood leaning against the wall. He was smoking a cigarette, and I was able to get a good look at the ring on his left hand. A moment later, I knew what the symbol was.

"Verbena," I whispered. How had I known that?

"What?"

I shook my head and turned my face into his neck, drawing a breath to inhale the masculine aroma that was Luke. My head spun slightly, remembering the subtle Kindred scent that had always clung to Jason.

"Wait until we sit down," I whispered against his skin. I felt his muscles move slowly beneath my hands as we swayed to the music.

I hadn't realized I had missed being with Luke in the time I had known Jason. I remembered the evenings when Luke, Estrea and I would go out on the town, how Luke would dance with both of us and joke about deciding which woman he liked best. Now I just missed Jason so much, wanted to be with him and talk to him, touch him. I missed his laughter and his smile. I longed to be held by him. I tried to picture myself in Jason's arms instead of Luke's.

After a time, I realized I couldn't pretend I was dancing with Jason. Luke was more lithe than Jason was, more graceful. His hands caressed the small of my back and his lips brushed against my hair. It felt wonderful to be able to lean on such a strong man and let him take my worries away, even if only for the length of a song.

Then I heard the haunting lyrics of the low and mournful ballad. "The night is dark, the air is cold/Without your love I've lost my soul/I've searched for you my whole life long/Then lost your love/Where did I go wrong?"

I turned my head slightly to look at Lena, and she smiled approvingly. I remembered the hand, the ring and the blood A shiver ran through my body. I wanted to move away, but Luke held me closer still, as if he understood the battle I was fighting.

Very softly I heard him whisper, "For Jason's sake, babe."

I nodded, and let the music and Luke's arms take me away as we moved to the gentle beat, our bodies fitting together in a familiar rhythm. From what Lena said later, we looked like lovers to anyone watching. Only Luke could feel my trembling, hear me take controlled breaths against his neck in an effort to contain the tears that threatened to overwhelm me.

When the music stopped, Luke kept an arm around me and led me through the crowd back to the table. I sat down and when Luke slid his chair close to mine again I didn't move away.

Luke leaned forward toward Lena. "The man standing against the wall has been following us since we got to Moscow," he told her.

Lena nodded. "He was at the embassy."

"I also saw that same design of ring on other people, first in Los Angeles, then in Flint, and on one of the Marines on the flight here."

Idly I enhanced my vision, hoping to glimpse the man's aura to get a clue of his intentions toward us. My eyes widened slightly as I caught sight of the multiple sparkles of color traveling through his aura. An aura like that could only mean one thing; the man was using magic.

I leaned closer to Luke, making him jump as I placed my hand on his knee. "He's Verbena, a mage tradition, a clan if you will. I recognize the symbol on his ring." I glanced back at the guy as casually as I could and saw that the sparkles still danced around him.

"This could be the same guy you saw all those times, Luke. The Verbena are witches, druids... and shapeshifters."

We stayed at the club for several hours that night, watching for any sign of Jason. Lena talked to the owner, but he hadn't seen Jason in months and wasn't expecting him any time soon.

Mikael and Kyle joined us around midnight, and Lena spent the remainder of the evening in Mikael's arms. Luke and I danced quite often, but only to slow songs. The rest of the time we sat at the table, whispering plans to find information about Jason as if we were speaking poetry to each other.

When the club closed, Lena went with Mikael and Kyle to see what they could discover in the Garou community. Luke and I walked the streets of Moscow almost until dawn, meeting and talking with some of the local Kindred, but couldn't find anyone who had talked to or seen anyone matching any of Jason's known disguises. We met Lena back at the Embassy and discovered that no one had come up with anything that night.

The next evening Lena told us about the Internet chat room where she had met Graves two years before. She had logged in that afternoon, but couldn't find any of her old contacts. She said she would keep trying, that maybe we could find something that would lead us to Jason.

I began checking the messages in my apartment the first thing every evening and the last thing before going to bed in the morning. I got a lot of hang-ups and a few messages from Brenda and Antonio, but I couldn't bring myself to return their calls.



During that first week in Moscow, we continued to visit every location we could think of that Jason or someone who had him might be. We went to nearly every bar and nightclub and walked the streets for hours. Early into our second week, Antonio called my cell phone.

"Christina," he asked, "how are things going?"

"Slow," I replied. "We're having problems finding any information."

"Well, I'm sure you'll find him," he told me.

"Given time," I said. I hoped that we weren't taking too much time and that he would still be alive when we found him.

"Other than the search, how are you doing?"

"I'm fine," I replied, crossing my fingers. Honestly, the only reason I'd been feeding was because Luke insisted on it. I wasn't sleeping well during the day, and I woke up frequently with nightmares.

He paused for a moment, then said, "Are you keeping up on your studies?"

"Of course."

"Good." Antonio's voice had a strange note to it, almost as if he knew I was lying.

"How are things in LA?" I asked.

"Difficult. The Brujah are giving the prince a terrible time," he told me. "Michael and I are working on solving the problem, but its slow going."

"You are being careful, aren't you?" I still worried about Antonio a lot, although most of the time my mind was preoccupied with thoughts Jason.

"Of course, my child." Now it was I who didn't believe him. "Well, keep me informed of your progress, Christina."

"I will, sire."

I closed the phone and sat staring out the window of the Embassy, for a moment wondering what Antonio thought of my insistence that I find Jason, a mere mortal. Then Luke walked back into the room ready to go to yet another bar and I dismissed Antonio from my mind.

That night as I drifted off to sleep thoughts of the past few weeks went through my head. I had horrible nightmares that day, but when I woke I only remembered the terror I'd felt.

Near midnight a few days before we were scheduled to leave Moscow, I got a call from Lena. She seemed excited and wanted us to meet her and the werewolves at the Embassy. Immediately Luke and I caught a cab there, the Verbena following as he had every night.

Lena told us she had finally gotten some information from the chat room she had been frequenting. Apparently, there was a warehouse on the outskirts of Moscow that had been experiencing a rise in Kindred activity. We agreed that we should check it out as soon as possible.

Luke and I returned to our room to get ready. As I armed myself, I was sure the ordeal would end that night and that by sunrise I would be in Jason's arms. Once again I was mistaken.

The three of us joined Mikael and Kyle in the Embassy lobby and as a group we started to walk down the street. Luke, Lena and I had decided to eliminate the Verbena, wanting one less opponent when we reached the warehouse.

One of the things Luke had brought with him from Los Angeles was a set of communications devices for each of us. This small gadget was the size of a dime and stuck to the skin behind the ear. Touching it once set it to a listening mode; you could listen to whoever else was wearing another device on the same channel. Touching it again set it to a talk mode; you could talk to and

hear whoever else wore one. Touching it a third time turned it off. When we left the Embassy, Luke, Lena and I all had our devices set to communicate with each other.

Our group walked away from the Embassy and turned a corner. Lena continued walking and talking with the Garou as Luke and I melted against the side of the building, drawing our guns before putting our arms around each other. Luke and I had loaded normal rounds in our weapons and also attached silencers before leaving our room to make sure we didn't alert anyone else to the Verbena's death.

When the man rounded the corner, Luke pulled me to one side and fired, hitting the man in the chest. I turned to see that he'd fallen, and shot him in the head, killing him instantly. I pushed the remorse I felt aside, believing this man to be part of those who were keeping Jason from me.

Luke kissed my lips quickly and before I could react, he was pulling the body toward the river. He searched the body as the others rejoined us, finding only a small black book and the man's ring, which Luke placed on his own hand.

Luke looked a moment at the black book. "This is weird," he murmured.

I peeked over his shoulder and saw that the writing in the book was mostly magical symbols and foreign languages. "Let me see," I said, and Luke handed the book to me.

Flipping through the pages, I discovered it had been hand written in at least six different languages. "Lena," I said to her, "Maybe later you and I could try to translate this."

She glanced at the book and nodded, her face pale. She turned away when Mikael helped Luke throw the body into the river.

We returned to the main road and caught two cabs to take us to the warehouse. We had some difficulty convincing the drivers to take us to the address we had, but Lena's money eventually convinced them.

Luke and I rode in the second cab alone. We both inconspicuously reloaded our weapons with phosphorous rounds, preparing for an encounter with Kindred.

I stared out the window, thinking about the morning Jason had been taken from me. For a moment I felt the sun again on my face, heard Jason scream in agony. I jumped slightly when Luke took my hand and squeezed it comfortingly. I looked into his deep brown eyes and pulled back a little, but he didn't let me go.

He leaned closer, whispering in my ear. "Babe, I know how you feel about Jason. Please let me give you this much."

As he moved back slightly, I studied his face, reading the care and concern he had for me. Slowly he put his arm around my shoulders and pulled me gently to him. I laid my head on his shoulder and selfishly accepted the comfort he offered me.

# BRUCKMAN'S

I cried and I cried

There were nights that I died for you baby

This Ain't a Love Song - Bon Jovi

When the car stopped, I looked up to see we had parked behind Lena's taxi. Luke paid the driver and we met the others on the street.

The neighborhood was not a good one. Many buildings were boarded up or burnt down. Garbage and stripped, abandoned cars lined the street. No one was in sight.

"No wonder the drivers didn't want to come here," Lena commented as the taxis sped away.

Mikael was looking around, and soon pointed to a building a few blocks away. "That must be it," he told us. As we approached it, we could see the sign proclaiming the building as Bruckman's.

We decided to split up, Mikael and Lena going around the right side of the building, Luke and I going to the left. Kyle would come in the front door if he could. We were all to kill anyone we saw near the building.

Mikael put his arm around Lena and pulled her close to his side. She blushed and looked up at him lovingly. As they walked down the side of the building, I felt a flash of jealousy; Lena was secure in the knowledge that Mikael loved her, I had no idea how Jason felt about me.

I had been holding Luke's hand and now I stepped closer to him. He put his arm around me and we walked toward the docking area on the left side of the building. In the near distance we could hear a train approaching. The area was dimly lit, but I could see the train tracks running through the lot beside us.

Luke's hand was in my hair, running his fingers through it. From the corner of my eye, I saw him toss his own hair back with a movement of his head. When the train began to pass us, his fingers tightened and he tugged on my hair, pulling my head back. As he did so, he moved in front of me, bending to kiss at my neck and saying, "Look up at the roof."

The wind from the train rocked us lightly as I looked where he directed and saw two people standing on the edge of the roof, leaning on the rail and looking in the other direction. I felt Luke's hand cross between us and he spun, pulling his gun and firing. As I pulled my own gun, I saw one of the men fall and the other stare down at his fallen comrade. The sound of the train hid the sound of my bullet exploding in the standing man's neck.

Luke grabbed my hand again and quickly pulled me toward the door we had seen in the side of the building. I reached out and tried the knob but it was locked.

"How are we going to get in?" I asked. Luke reached out and turned the knob roughly, forcing it open. Slowly he pushed it back and peered inside.

"After you," he whispered.

I walked carefully into a large room, staying close to the wall. Lena's voice in my ear whispered that they were in and across the room, I could see Lena and Mikael entering just as silently as we had. A look at Mikael showed him to be slightly larger than he'd been the last time I saw him. I smiled grimly; at least this time the werewolves were on our side.

I glanced to my right and saw Kyle standing against the far wall, also slightly larger. I looked left and saw our enemies.

Four people were standing around a man who knelt on the floor. As I opened up my senses, I saw that ribbons of multi-colored lights surrounded the kneeling man and I knew that he used

magic. I also noted that three of the four men standing were Kindred and that the other was mortal. Beyond them, I saw the dim outlines of a cage.

Mikael fired the first shot and one of the Kindred flew back. I fired and saw the standing human drop, a flaming hole in his chest.

I heard a commotion and turned to see a hideously disfigured Nosferatu on top of Luke, who had fallen to the floor. I had seen enough. Deep down I knew these men were somehow involved with Jason's disappearance and now one of them was hurting Luke. Rage filled me and I felt my fangs extend. I hissed loudly and tackled the Nosferatu, throwing him to the ground. I felt my gun impact with its temple and he groaned, reaching up with his left hand and slicing my side open with a knife. I ignored the wound and reared up, swinging the gun like a club. Bone crunched as blood spurted from his nose.

The Kindred's other hand curled into a fist and struck me across the jaw. I used the momentum of the blow to rock backward, then returned quickly, smashing the gun against his temple again. He stopped moving and I rolled off of him, turning to check on Luke as the fury cleared from my mind.

I moved to his side and gently touched his cheek. He opened his eyes and looked up at me, dazed. I pressed my other hand to the wound in my side and instinctively closed it, healing myself.

I glanced over my shoulder to see the others poking at the bodies on the floor. I hadn't even noticed when the gunfire had stopped.

Luke sat up, the gash across his chest closing slowly. He had already stopped bleeding. He got up, took my hand and led me over to the others.

Mikael and Kyle were covered with blood, but didn't appear to be hurt. Lena didn't seem to be injured, and really didn't have much blood on her either.

I looked toward the cage. It was bolted to the floor and its walls were constructed of thick iron bars. A naked body lay inside and I gasped, running to the cage and throwing open the door. I turned the body over and cried out. The face was unrecognizably beaten, but the body was the right shape to be Jason. A gunshot wound gaped in the center of the chest, effectively obliterating any mark that may have been there. The left hand was severed.

"Jason?" I whispered, not totally convinced it was he.

Lena knelt beside me and laid her hands on the man's chest. She closed her eyes and seemed to stop breathing for a moment. When she looked at me, her eyes were dark with pain.

"It's not Jason," she told me softly. "This man was someone they dragged in off the street. They beat him and threw him in here with a vampire." Lena turned the man's head so I could see the twin marks on his neck. "Then they shot him. They cut off his hand after he died."

I took a deep breath to steady myself and stood slowly. I walked out of the cage and the few steps to Luke's side, then looked down around, feeling lost and alone. What if they had done the same thing to Jason?

I must have whispered that thought aloud, for Luke pulled me into his arms, holding me close against his chest.

"No, babe," He whispered into my hair. "He's still alive, I know it."

Kyle touched my shoulder and I looked up at his kind blue eyes. "You need to keep faith that we'll find him, lass," he told me kindly.

I glanced at him and shook my head, tears falling from my eyes. "Jason is the one with faith. I don't have any."

Kyle smiled. "Then it's his faith you need to be believing in. Jason is a man of God. He will be protected. You'll be seeing him soon."

I turned my face away, hiding in Luke's shirt. He began to run his hands along my back. "We'll find him," Luke told me.

Mikael joined us. "You've been hurt," he stated roughly, noting the blood on our clothing. "Would the blood left in these bodies help you heal?"

Luke nodded and gently released me, watching my face. I wiped at my tears and gave him a tiny smile. He took a step away and crouched near one of the humans. He picked up the hand and I watched as he bit into the skin and began to drink. I turned away before he finished, hugging myself and looking down at the bodies. I knew I needed blood, but I didn't want it.

I looked around the room, taking in the bodies and the open cage. A crate stood a few feet from the cage, its top blood stained. There were several scars on the top of the crate that could have been made with a hatchet. I couldn't stop thinking that if we'd only gotten here sooner we'd have found Jason.

"You need to feed," I heard a deep voice say behind me. I turned to see Mikael standing there, his arms folded across his chest.

I shook my head and took a step away from him. "I'm not hungry."

Lena looked up from where she'd been examining the crate. "Christina, you need to feed," she told me. "You were hurt tonight, you need the blood."

"I'm not hungry." I walked toward the front of the building, intent upon getting away from the bodies. Luke caught my arm before I'd taken more than a few steps.

I turned to look up at him questioningly and tugged lightly at his grip. He didn't let go.

"You need to feed," he said sternly.

"I'm fine."

"Please, babe," he coaxed, "when we find Jason you need to be at your full strength."

I looked up into his eyes, searching for some sign of why he cared what happened to Jason. He didn't really know him, why should he travel half the world to find him?

"Please," he repeated.

I dropped my eyes, afraid of what I'd seen. Did Luke care so much about me he was willing to find Jason so that I would be happy? It was the only answer that made sense.

I nodded and walked to one of the Kindred bodies. Gingerly I picked up the hand and bit slowly into the wrist. The blood was cold, and for a moment I didn't think I could keep it down. I drank until I was full, then quickly dropped the arm and stood.

"Damn," Luke exclaimed, getting a good look at the man's face.

I glanced at him. "What?"

"That's Van Able," he told me. "The Tremere primogen from LA."

I looked down at the body, wondering what he'd wanted the crystal so badly for that he'd taken Jason from me.

"Can we go now?" I asked. Mikael and Kyle had determined the warehouse had no upper or lower levels, and they had gone through every room that they had found while Lena and I had checked out the body in the cell. Jason was not there and there was no sign that he ever had been.

We walked a long way from the warehouse before we found a taxi that would stop for us. We all climbed in and directed it to an all night department store, where Lena, the least bloody of us all, went in and purchased trench coats for the rest of us. The taxi dropped Mikael and Kyle at their hotel, then continued to the Embassy, where we were able to sneak in without comment or incident.

Luke offered me first use of the shower, and I took it gratefully. I stripped quickly and stepped into a stream of water so hot I could barely stand it. I stood under its flow for a long time with my eyes closed, thinking about Jason.

Somehow I knew he had been in that cell, that the people we had killed, both Kindred and Kine, had been involved in his disappearance. I felt we had barely missed him, that perhaps only days before, Jason had been held captive there. I tried to dismiss my thoughts, knowing I couldn't possibly be sure what had happened either to Jason or in that warehouse.

Eventually I turned off the water and dried myself, dressing in a clean pair of Jason's pajamas that he had let me borrow in the past. It had taken me until the night before to bring myself to even open Jason's suitcase. Other than clothing and a few pairs of shoes, the only personal belongings I found was an earring I'd seen him wear a few times. It had been like going through the personal effects of a man without a past.

I walked out of the bathroom and sat on the bed to brush my hair. Luke glanced at me, then went into the bathroom. I heard the shower turn on and sat looking at Jason's suitcase, which I had repacked and placed against a wall the previous night. The brush lay unused in my lap.

Some time later I heard the shower turn off. I heard Luke dressing, and light spilled across the room when he opened the bathroom door. After a few minutes of silence, Luke crouched beside the bed, laying his hands gently over mine.

"A penny for them, babe," he said softly.

I continued to look over his head. He glanced over his shoulder to see what I was looking at, then turned back to me.

"Christina." I blinked and looked down at him. "What are you thinking?" he asked.

I looked back at the suitcases, my hands tightening on his. "What if he is dead?"

Luke stood and climbed on the bed, kneeling behind me. He took the brush from my hands and began to run it through my hair. "I can't believe the Jason we know would die that easily, babe," he told me as he brushed my long dark hair. "He pulled you out of some pretty tough spots, do you really think he would give up easily?"

I felt ashamed that I had believed just that. I put my head down, looking at my hands while Luke continued to brush the tangles carefully from my hair.

"Luke, all humans have to die sometime."

"It's not his time," he told me.

"How do you know that?" I asked, turning to face him.

Luke sat back on his heels and let his hands fall to his thighs. "He has something very special to come back to, babe," he said softly, his voice lacking its usual humor. "He has you. You need him."

After a moment, he smiled and motioned for me to turn around. "Let me finish this before your hair dries."

I turned slowly, thinking about the things Luke had said. It seemed that having me waiting for him and needing him would be a reason for Luke to survive, but would that be true for Jason as well? I just didn't quite know how Jason felt about me, and I was only beginning to see the depths of my feelings for Jason.

Luke continued his gentle brushing long after the tangles were gone and I sat completely relaxed before him. My eyes began to drag as dawn neared, and I felt him move off the bed. He laid the brush on the dresser and returned to pull the blankets back. Carefully he picked me up, placed me between the sheets, and pulled the covers up to my chin. His fingers ran across my cheek in a soft caress and I grabbed his hand before he could withdraw.

He let me keep the hand and sat on the edge of the bed looking down at me silently, waiting.

"Thank you, Luke," I whispered. "You have been very kind to me."

"I just did what I had to, babe," he replied.

"You've done so much more than that," I told him. "You have gone above and beyond the call of friendship. Thank you."

He smiled sadly down at me and squeezed my hand. "Just wait till it's your turn," he said. "Some biker chick is going to leave me broken and you'll have to help me pick up the pieces."

I tried to smile in return as my eyes drifted shut. "I'll be there for you, Luke, I promise." I fell asleep still holding his hand in mine.

# LOSS OF HOPE

I've run out of patience, tears and hope

Love does not conquer all

Too Late: Frozen - Type O Negative

We spent the remainder of our time in Moscow following false leads and running into dead ends. Although we checked with everyone on the list that Michael had given us and quite a few other informants as well, we could find no information on Jason or his whereabouts. It was as if the earth had swallowed Jason whole at the monastery in Italy, and he hadn't been seen since.

I had difficulty feeding during the remainder of our stay in Moscow. I would smell the blood and feel the hunger, but the thought of feeding made me feel ill. Luke kept at me, though, convincing me I had to stay strong to be able to help Jason when the time came. By the end of our second week, I was tired of arguing with him and fed whenever he told me to. His most convincing argument was that I needed to be strong to help Jason when we found him. I had to stop myself from thinking *if* we found him, but the dead ends and disappointments made it difficult.

We decided to return to the holding. Mikael and Kyle found other travel arrangements while the rest of us took the military plane that had been assigned to take Katie Jo Jackson and her group back to Rhinemane AFB. We then took a cab to the local commercial airport and boarded the private plane Lena had hired for our trip to the holding.

As the plane began to taxi down the runway, I heard Lena whisper Jason's name. She was pale, almost as if she'd seen a ghost.

"Lena," I asked, "what is it?"

"Nothing," she said, shaking her head. "We just have to find him."

Nothing, she'd said, but from the corner of my eye I saw her look behind us toward the terminal. I followed her gaze but couldn't see anything that would have upset her.

That day we slept at the holding. I was used to sleeping with Luke in my room, and while I felt the dragging sleepiness morning always brings, it was difficult for me to drift off to sleep alone. That day I dreamed that I was the man we had found in the cell at Bruckman's.

*I was pulled out of a van and dragged blindfolded into the warehouse. Once inside, my blindfold was ripped from my head and I screamed when I saw the Nosferatu that Mikael had killed that night in the warehouse. I was beaten about the face and shoulders and eventually I was allowed to fall to my knees. I could taste the blood in my mouth, human and coppery. Two Kindred dragged me to the cage where I could see a man standing in a corner, his face in shadow.*

*"Are you ready for your first feeding?" the Nosferatu asked. The man did not reply.*

*"I know the hunger of the embrace, childe," the grotesque form beside me growled. "I know you burn for the blood within him."*

*I screamed again, fearing the worst. The two that held me ripped my clothing off as I struggled to get away. I cried out in Russian for them to have pity on me, to let me go. Instead, they threw me into the cage and slammed the door shut. I fell to my knees and begged to be released, but they only laughed at me.*

*I turned to see the man in the corner slowly walk toward me. I fell to my stomach on the bare floor and pleaded for my life. I felt his hand at my shoulder and he gently turned me over.*



*I looked up at the beautiful man kneeling beside me. His hair was blond and fell across his forehead. He had hazel eyes so sad that they made me want to cry. His jaw was strong, and his lips were perfectly formed.*

*I watched dazed while those lips drew back to reveal fangs. His slow, reluctant movements hypnotized me as he bent toward my neck. I closed my eyes and felt his teeth sink into my flesh. My head swam as he drank from my veins, drawing deeply.*

*Just before I lost consciousness, he pulled away, gasping. "I won't kill him," I heard him say in a wonderfully smooth voice.*

*I heard movements near the cage and the man beside me cried out as a gunshot echoed through the warehouse. I felt the bullet go deep in my chest, saw my own blood splatter across the cell. As I lay bleeding to death, the handsome man at my side, I heard a hoarse laugh from outside the cage.*

*"He is dying anyway, Jason. You might as well finish him off."*

*"I won't!" I heard him reply as the life drained from my body.*

I sat up in the bed, gasping for air that my lungs didn't need. I felt my chest but found no wound. I closed my eyes and again saw Jason as I had that last instant in my dreams, his handsome face defiant, my blood still on his teeth. I sank back onto the bed and knew no more that day.

Lena returned to the chat room, but the person she'd talked to before didn't log on. She called a friend in New York and asked him to watch for certain names and phrases to come up during the course of his business. Bruckman's was first on the list.

Luke and I spent a lot of time together, walking in the woods near the castle, hunting, talking and renewing our friendship. We kept the village well supplied with meat during the four days we stayed at the holding, and fed well ourselves. I began to depend on Luke for a great deal, both physically and emotionally.

We decided that when the next lead came that we would keep up the charade we'd begun in Moscow in case we were followed again. It would be difficult for anyone to think I was looking for my boyfriend if I traveled with my lover.

Lena's friend called and gave her the name of a man in Paris who might have information for us on the owner of the warehouse in Moscow. She immediately contacted a rental agency and arranged for us to have a private jet at our disposal until further notice. When Luke and I awoke that evening, Lena had already packed our bags for departure.

I walked hand in hand with Luke along Paris' Left Bank, holding hands and keeping an eye out for anyone who might be following us. Luke and I were on our way to the Louvre where we were to meet our contact. The gentleman had supposedly seen Jason in Moscow last week.

As we walked, I looked up at Luke thoughtfully. "Luke, I think we need to talk," I told him.

"I didn't do it," he said, smiling down at me.

I couldn't return his smile. "Seriously."

"About what?" he asked as his smile faded.

I looked away, out over the river. "This whole thing," I said softly. "You, me... Jason."

"Babe," he said, squeezing my hand lightly, "we don't have to talk about it."

I stopped walking and looked up at him, confused. "What do you think is going to happen when we find him?" I asked.

"I think he'll be fine," Luke replied taking both of my hands in his.

"I mean with us, Luke," I said softly. "What do you think is going to happen with us?"

Luke looked down at me with his heart in his eyes. It was then that I knew for certain that he loved me.

"Luke, I—"

"Christina, we don't have to talk about this now," he told me firmly, pulling me into his arms. As he cradled me against his chest, he whispered, "We'll cross that bridge when we get there."

I closed my eyes, feeling his strength flow into me. "Luke...."

"No, babe," he whispered against my hair, "we'll find Jason and worry about anything else later."

I hesitated, then nodded against his chest. After a few minutes, we stepped apart and walked on, still holding hands.

As our time in Paris passed, I grew despondent. Within a few days, we realized the lead Lena's friend had given us was a dead end. Lena's chat room revealed the name of a club in Berlin that may have been associated with the owners of Bruckman's, so we arranged to fly there next.

Just after sundown on our last full night in Paris, I checked my answering machine at my Vegas apartment. The voice on the last message was unmistakably that of the crone who had taken Jason.

"How is your search going? Have you found your handsome prince yet? Such a shame about his hand. When he refused to help us, it gave me great pleasure to watch him die." The crone laughed harshly and hung up.

In that moment I realized just how much I loved Jason; in that moment I lost what little faith I still had that we would find him; in that moment I became driven to destroy those who had murdered him.

I laid down my cell phone and walked out of the hotel suite without a word to the two people who had become my closest friends, my family. I clicked off the communication device that I always wore now and walked for hours through Paris, thinking only of Jason.

He had come for me, had saved me from The Society of Leopold and later from the Salem prince's twisted scheme. Yet I had failed to save him. I had failed him.

I relived every moment we had together, every word he had spoken, every touch we shared. I tasted again of his blood and his lips and held him once more in my arms as we swayed together with the lights of San Francisco spreading out before us.

I took all of those memories and stored them away in a corner of my frozen heart. I knew that someday I would want to take them out and revisit them when it wouldn't hurt so much, like rereading love letters tucked into an old shoebox.

As I walked, I realized that a part of me wanted to continue walking until the sun rose over the horizon. I would be with Jason then, or so that part of me rationalized. We would be together and nothing would separate us again.

I fought those feelings, and began to stoke the twin fires in my soul, the fires whose names were Revenge and Fury. I built those fires up so high that I felt their heat warm me from the inside. I resolved not to abandon my vow; I would find Jason's killers and destroy them, destroy everyone involved in his death and disappearance.

A few hours before dawn I came to a stop in the shadows of Notre Dame. I gazed up at its famous spires and stained glass windows and longed for the courage to go inside. Somehow, I remembered that God had been a great comfort to me when I was mortal, but I knew I couldn't find

peace with him tonight. My embrace had placed me beyond the pale; God had no use for those such as me. I was on a dark path, and it didn't matter if I'd chosen to walk it or been forced onto it.

I glanced up at the night sky and realized that Luke stood beside me. I looked at him and he met my gaze with a smile.

"Welcome back," he said.

Wordlessly I held my hand out to him and he took it. With the touch of his fingers I determined not to let the chance Luke was giving me slip away. I was convinced that Jason was dead and it still hurt me deeply that we had never spoken to each other about our feelings. I knew I didn't want to leave those words of love unspoken ever again.

I knew now that life was very fragile for who knew when the end would come? We as Kindred were immortal, but only if a hunter didn't come by and stake us in the sun, or if a lower generation Kindred didn't decide to make himself more powerful by dining on our vitae.

Luke and I began to walk again, hand in hand through Paris, the most romantic city in the world.

When we returned to the hotel Lena was pacing nervously. The moment we entered the suite she pounced on me.

"You don't believe him, do you?" she demanded. I had known she would listen to the message, which was the main reason I had left my phone behind.

I shrugged, going to the dresser and pulling out a modest nightgown, overlooking Jason's pajamas for the first time since I'd gone through our luggage in Moscow.

"Christina, you can't think he's dead," Lena insisted.

I paused in mid-stride on my way to the bathroom to shower. I walked over to her side and leaned down to kiss her cheek.

"Lena," I whispered softly, crouching at her side. "You are like a sister to me now and I realize that its important for you to believe Jason is still alive. Believe me when I say that every corner of my soul wants Jason to be alive, cries out for that to be true. My heart aches to look into his eyes, to feel the touch of his hand on mine. I long to hear his voice whispering to me, proving to me that he is alive." My voice broke with the effort of verbalizing my love for Jason for the first time.

"But my mind is breaking under the strain of fighting with the fact that I have failed him where he would have saved me," I told her, tears falling from my eyes. "Try to understand that thinking he's alive and being unable to find him is more than I can take right now. Please, lets both just believe what we have to in order to get through this, and not argue the point."

Lena hugged me close and kissed my cheek. "I'll believe enough for both of us," she said.

"Yes," I replied with a sad smile, "you have the heart for it." I turned and walked to the bathroom, showered quickly, and prepared myself for bed.

As I waited for sleep to claim me, I watched Luke settle himself on the floor beside my bed. I kept thinking about how I'd never told Jason that I loved him.

Just before I fell asleep, I reached down and put my hand over Luke's where it lay on his chest. As my eyes drifted closed, I saw his open in surprise, but the dawn had me in its numbing grip and I slept.

# WATCHERS

I can feel your eyes go through me  
But I don't know why  
In Too Deep - Genesis

Lena watched me with sad eyes and fought to keep Jason alive in my mind. She was certain he was still alive and that we would eventually find him. The more she tried to convince me, the more I realized she was trying to convince herself so I stopped arguing with her over it.

Luke agreed that Jason was still alive. He went with Lena and I to Berlin and then on to Madrid without question. He helped us follow every lead, and worked as hard as Lena and I to find information that would lead us to Jason or his killers. He also seemed just as disappointed as we were when our leads led us nowhere.

Lena and I grew closer as we continued our search. Only two things came between us: our inability to agree on Jason's fate and my growing relationship with Luke.

It was difficult for me to explain to her, or even to myself for that matter, how much I needed Luke at this point. He was the only thing that kept me sane as my mind replayed my failure to find Jason over and over again. One touch from Luke would clear my thoughts and allow me to function. I didn't know how or why it had happened, I only knew that it was true.

I couldn't make Luke or Lena understand that I simply couldn't stand to eat, so I stopped trying. One night in Berlin I vomited after feeding and while I was able to hide it, I knew I couldn't take it anymore. After that I pretended to feed in order to pacify them and stop their well-intentioned badgering. The hunger burned sharply within me, but it was far more tolerable than the nausea feeding caused.

Lena's friend called while we were in Madrid to tell her of a body found in a warehouse in Nashville that was missing the left hand. The name of the warehouse was Bruckman's. We flew to America that same night.

Luke and I visited the prince just after sundown. We both noticed that she seemed to be enamored of the Brujah primogen and she often looked to him for confirmation before finishing her sentences.

We rejoined Lena and visited the warehouse, but there was nothing there to lead us to believe that Jason had ever been there. Over Luke's protest, I drove our rental car to the Tremere Chantry alone. Faith, the Tremere primogen, welcomed me warmly.

"I have heard good things about Antonio," she told me, tossing her dark curly hair over her shoulder and gesturing for me to sit on a chair in the library where she had greeted me. "I understand you are looking for someone?"

"Yes," I replied. "A friend of mine and Antonio's. He was kidnapped in Italy almost a month ago and I have been searching for information on his whereabouts ever since."

Faith studied my face for a moment and I tried to keep my expression carefully neutral. "He is a good friend of yours?"

I nodded. "A very good friend." I ignored the persistent itching I felt in my arm where the crystal lay; it had started prickling as soon as I entered the chantry grounds, and I knew without asking that the chantry stood on a place of power.

"He is a friend of your companions also?" she asked, sitting down across from me. It was disconcerting to have such probing questions come from one who looked too young to drive, but I knew she was probably much older than me.

"Yes." I glanced around the room. The bookcases were filled with numerous old volumes of classic literature.

She smiled kindly and her brown eyes were compassionate as she said, "But I think you were the closest to him."

I met her eyes, startled.

"I'm afraid it shows, my dear," Faith told me. "If you care so much about the one you are trying to find, what's up with the Gangrel you travel with?"

"Luke and I have been good friends for a long time," I replied, struggling to regain my composure.

"From Las Vegas, I believe."

I blinked in surprise, wondering how much she knew about me. "What can you tell me about the body found at Bruckman's warehouse?"

"I believe the police have solved that murder," she said almost casually.

"I would like to know what you know about it," I replied with a small smile.

She stood, and walked over to a large volume laying open on a table. "A group of Kindred flew into town a week ago. They moved into the warehouse and met with Wyatt, the Brujah primogen. A few nights later they left as quietly as they arrived and the next day a watchman found the body." She turned and looked back at me. "Wyatt made sure the investigation was quiet and short. A local man was arrested and is now awaiting arraignment."

"Any idea who the Kindred who left were?"

She shrugged and walked back to her seat. "A few Brujah and a mute Nosferatu," she said. "None had been seen here in town before."

I nodded thoughtfully.

"Are you aware you are being followed?" she asked quietly.

"Yes." We had picked up another Verbena tail in Madrid.

"By more than one party, childe, did you know that?" Her hands smoothed her mini skirt down over the tops of her thighs.

"More than one?" We hadn't seen a second pursuer, but perhaps we had not looked past the mage.

"Yes," she replied. "The other ones seem to be just watching your movements. I didn't mean to alarm you. They're Kindred but don't seem to mean you any harm."

A knock sounded on the library door and another young looking girl stepped in. She wore faded jeans and a short shirt that bared her midriff. Her long dark hair and slanted eyes showed Asian descent. It occurred to me that all the Tremere I'd seen in this city looked well under twenty.

"Faith, Mistress Van Dorn is on the telephone for you," the girl said.

Faith stood. "I'm afraid I have to take this. Clan business, you understand."

I also rose to my feet. "Completely."

"I'll let you know if anything changes with your tagalongs," she stated as she walked toward the doors.

"Any help you can give would be appreciated," I replied gratefully.

Faith nodded. "Katie will show you out."

Katie followed me to the door. "Did Faith get a chance to warn you about Charisma Therin?"

I paused before exiting the house. "No, who is she?"

"She's a hunter, beautiful and deadly" Katie stated. "Don't feed openly in town and she'll leave you alone."

"Thanks for the warning," I replied and nodded to her as I turned and walked to the car, finally giving in to the persistent itch on my arm and scratching at it.

While driving back to the hotel, I watched my mirrors closely. When I saw that a car was following me, I lightly touched the device behind my ear twice.

"Luke," I said softly.

I heard a dull click from behind my ear. "Yeah," he replied.

"Is that Verbena still with you?"

"Sitting at the far table, babe," he answered. "Why?"

"It seems we have another tail to worry about," I told him. "I'm being followed."

"What?" Luke's tone had grown hard and I could hear the effort he was making to keep his voice down. "Where are you?"

"I'll be pulling into the parking lot in just a few minutes," I said and immediately I heard a scraping noise, as if Luke had come to his feet quickly.

"Be right there," he said.

I parked near Luke's motorcycle and stepped out of the car quickly, remembering my surprise when the bike had been waiting for him at the airport. I looked around and watched the car that had been following me pulling into a lot across the street.

I felt a hand on my arm and turned to find Luke beside me. He looked around angrily, pushing me behind him. I pushed back.

"I'm not a doll," I said, somewhat amused by his protectiveness.

"Where are they?" he demanded.

I pointed across the street at the dark sedan. "Over there. It's a girl." I had slowed enough to catch a glimpse of her face in my mirror before she fell back.

Luke relaxed a little when he saw that the car's single occupant was simply watching us. He turned, trying to keep himself between her and me, his hand still on my arm.

"Faith says they're just following," I whispered, "watching."

"She knows about them?" he asked, glancing over his shoulder.

"She told me about them."

Luke put his arms around me and hugged me. I closed my eyes and leaned into his embrace. I peered over his shoulder and saw the sedan drive away.

As we walked into the hotel, I remembered how Faith had said that my feelings for Jason still showed. I blinked back the tears and turned away to hide them from Luke.

We went up to our suite and I filled Lena and Luke in on what Faith had told me. It was nearing dawn and we decided to see if we could find out any more on the mysterious visiting Kindred that evening.

I thought of the clues left on the toilet paper, the Countess in Detroit, the call from Jason, the crystal, and the monastery where Jason was abducted. I fell asleep remembering that we hadn't checked the other bodies of the Kindred at Bruckman's in Moscow to make sure they were dead.

*I was back in the wine cellar of the monastery with Jason. Robert, the man from my dream in LA, and Jason stood before me, watching me intently. Robert held out his hand and I saw my bracelet*

on his palm. Jason handed me a small box that I took from him slowly. As I reached for it, Robert fastened the bracelet on my wrist. I opened the box and the crystal inside began to glow.

"I want you to keep this on you at all times," Jason told me. "Cut yourself and heal over it, or swallow it, just keep it hidden on yourself at all times."

"I want you to keep this on at all times," Robert echoed. "If you ever get into trouble, it will help me find you."

I glanced at his face, then put the crystal in the palm of my hand. Its light began to pulse like a heartbeat.

Jason spoke again. "The crystal will help me find you if—"

"It s Nickoli now, is it not?" the withered mage boomed from the doorway.

Quickly I pressed the crystal to my arm and felt it sink into my flesh as Jason turned to face the crone. The mage pointed a bony finger at Jason, who began to walk forward stiffly.

"No!" I cried, "You can't have him!"

I tried to move forward, but Robert grabbed me around the waist and held me firmly in place.

"Tina," Robert whispered in my ear, "why did you break it? I can't find you anymore."

Crying, I fought his grip, but I was unable to get away, unable to get to Jason, unable to stop the crone from taking him once more.

"I already have him, witch," the crone told me.

Jason seemed to be in a trance as he stopped before the horrible mage. Suddenly a blue glow surrounded him and he screamed in agony, his back arching, his head falling back, his eyes closed.

"No!" I screamed again, and broke away from Robert only to take one step and realize that I was alone. I looked around in confusion to see that I was standing in a circle of rocks that could only be Stonehenge. It was very close to dawn and I was alone.

I could feel power filling the circle and as I looked around it seemed to be getting stronger. The power grew until I began to feel a pulse in my arm where the crystal lay and hear it beat within me. I walked to the center of the circle and closed my eyes. The power came from somewhere inside of me, and felt almost like a heartbeat.

I looked down to see that a golden glow surrounded my body. The energy continued to build until I was near ecstasy with the emotions it was generating within me. The pulsing grew stronger and louder until it was all I could feel, all I could hear.

I threw my head back and raised my arms to the dawning sky. I felt the power surging through my body and I screamed in rapture. I'm sure in that moment I resembled Jason in his paroxysm of pain.

A voice began to speak in my mind and it captured my full attention. I no longer saw the rocks around me or the light in the sky to the east.

"Christina Joanne Strong," the voice said to me, full of passion and mystery. "Childe of the House and Clan Tremere, why are you in this place of power so close to the dawn that will destroy you?"

"I dream," I replied simply.

"How did you come by the crystal?" the voice asked, it's very sound invoking images of music and springtime.

"A friend gave it to me for safekeeping before he was killed." Even with the incredible feelings running through me from the power, tears pricked my eyes. "I have kept it safe and will return it to its rightful owner as soon as I can."

"You have no wish to use the power for yourself?" The voice seemed surprised.

*"No," The power surged within me and I cried out again, lost to the sensation.*

*"The power can give you anything, Christina," the voice told me. "It can give you your memory back, even make you human again."*

*I let the power flow through me, not understanding why the voice was offering this to me now.*

*"I have never craved being human," I told the voice. "I don't remember it and I don't miss it. As to my memory, I believe it will return when the time is right. It would be wrong for me to use this wondrous power on something so trivial as my memory."*

*"Some would say you are a fool for turning down this chance," the voice warned me.*

*"Many would seem the fool to others," I replied. "I have done well with my life and have few regrets or needs."*

*A thought occurred to me suddenly. "You say I can use the power for anything? Could I use it to find Jason's murderers?"*

*"What would that profit you, Christina?"*

*"Profit?" I was confused. "Why would I have to profit? I have vowed to avenge his death."*

*"Even though if you use the power for yourself you would never be able to return the crystal to the Countess?"*

*I thought about that for a moment. Could I steal such a precious thing from an elder of my clan?*

*Again I threw my head back and screamed, this time in torment. I knew I couldn't use the crystal if it meant betraying my clan, the vow I'd taken my first night with Antonio prevented it. I began to struggle with the power inside of me, tried to release myself and hide in the shadows of the stones before the sun rose above the horizon.*

*"Why do you fight the power, my child?" the voice asked.*

*"I can't! I must return the crystal to its rightful owner." I could feel blood tears streaming down my face, and renewed my efforts to release the power.*

*I fell to my knees and clutched at the dirt beneath me. I felt the power rising again and with every ounce of willpower I could summon I forced it down. I screamed in agony as it left me and the sun rose in the east.*

*"You will find him, child," the voice told me, "but he must save himself."*

*The world faded to blackness and the pain was gone.*

I sat up in the bed, fully awake. I ran a hand over my eyes, struggling to break from the images of the dream.

*You will find him.*

Did that mean there was only one person responsible for Jason's death? And why would Jason's murderer have to save himself?

Slowly I became aware that my hand was grubby and that I was wiping dirt all over my face. My hands were covered with earth and I remembered clutching at the ground as I knelt in the center of the stones. I rose and went quickly to the bathroom and looked in the mirror.

I gasped to realize my skin was an irritated pink, as if I had actually been exposed for several seconds to the sunlight. Had my dream been real or was I imagining the dirt and the burn now? Hearing Luke stir in the bedroom, I quickly washed my face and hands and healed the burn on my skin.



# SECOND THOUGHTS

I think I'll go for a walk baby out in the rain  
Maybe let the tears roll down my face and not feel the pain  
Nothing but you - Kim Ferron

Jason's death was weighing heavy on my mind as we walked into The Iron in Nashville. I really wasn't watching where I was going and literally ran into a woman who was going out just as we were coming in. Startled, I stepped back and apologized. As I moved to go around her, she said something I didn't catch and caught my arm.

"Christina?" the woman asked.

I looked into her face for the first time. "Brenda?" I whispered, a little stunned at seeing my sister so unexpectedly.

She threw her arms around me, but I'm afraid that perhaps I wasn't as enthusiastic in return. After allowing a brief embrace, I stepped back.

"Mayhap we should step outside," a masculine voice said from behind her. I looked to see a tall gentleman with short blond hair standing at her shoulder. For the space of a heartbeat I allowed myself to hope, then I realized he looked nothing like Jason.

I nodded and turned to see that Luke and Lena had already stepped back outside. I joined them, and we turned to the left, walking a little way from the entrance to the club.

Brenda and the blond gentleman joined us, along with a tall dark Kindred and a young blond girl. Brenda introduced the blond man as Bruce Blackwell and the other Kindred as Angel. When she told us that the girl was Charisma Therin, I took a step behind Luke and placed my hand on his shoulder, peeking from behind him at the hunter I had been warned about.

"I have heard stories of your beauty but they fall far short of the truth," Luke said to the girl as he placed his hand over mine.

Brenda looked at our joined hands and her face grew dark. She reached out for my free hand, but Bruce stopped her.

"Any sign of aggression here would put Charisma in danger," he stated, his voice heavy with an Old World English accent.

Brenda glanced at the hunter, who said, "Hey, family reunion, no big. Why don't we meet at ten where I saw the girl last night?"

Brenda nodded. When Charisma and Angel walked back to the entrance and joined several other teenagers, Brenda grabbed my hand and pulled me further along the side of the building. When Luke would have followed us closely, I waived him back.

"What's going on?" she demanded, her voice low.

"What are you so upset about?" I asked in confusion.

"A month ago you were so wrapped up in 'Martín' you couldn't see anyone else. Three weeks ago you were so upset over his disappearance you were dashing around the globe trying to find him. Tonight you're on that Gangrel like a fish on water. What's up?"

I pulled my hand away from hers abruptly. "Jason's dead."

Brenda took a step back. "What?"

"When we got to Moscow, we couldn't find him. We found his hand, and the ring he'd been wearing, but not a clue as to his whereabouts." I glanced back at the others who'd been following us at a slight distance, and Luke immediately joined us.

Brenda glared at him, but he just stood by my side, his shoulder brushing mine. Luke's presence comforted me as it had so often in the last few weeks.

"Are you sure he's dead?" she asked.

"Yes," I replied.

"No," Luke stated at the same time.

Brenda looked from me to Luke and back, confused. "Which is it?"

"If he were alive, he would have found some way to contact me," I told her. "He hasn't."

"Babe," Luke said softly, putting a hand in the small of my back. "We don't know what he's been going through. He may not be able to contact you."

"If he were alive, he would have." I said, turning to him angrily. "He called me before they took his hand. Wasn't that grisly present enough to convince you he was in serious trouble? What about the dead-ends, the endless searching? You may want to believe he's alive, but you know I can't do it."

Luke was immediately contrite and put his arm around my shoulders. "I'm sorry. I know how you feel about this. If you don't want to talk about it again we won't."

"Good," I said firmly even as I leaned into him, "we won't."

Brenda looked from the anger in my face to the affection in Luke's. She took my arm and began leading me toward the parking lot and away from the others. They followed at a distance, Luke closer than the other two.

"Look," she protested, "maybe you're too close to this. Maybe you should let someone else look for him."

"I have vowed to find his killers, Brenda," I told her. "I can't stop until I have done so."

"Do you think it's a good idea to be so involved with Luke right now? Don't you think he's taking advantage of the situation?" She glanced over her shoulder. "How many times have you fed from him?"

"Brenda," I replied angrily. "I spent five months with Jason and never once did we tell each other how we felt. I tried once—" I stopped and looked down, my voice breaking as I remembered the kiss at the monastery.

"I tried to tell him, but now he's dead and I'll never get that chance again. Do you have any idea how that makes me feel? I don't want to lose another opportunity like that just because I'm afraid. Luke is a good friend and he's always been there for me, even before I met Jason."

Brenda stopped and looked away. I felt a hand in the small of my back and turned to look up at Luke.

"Have you spoken to Antonio lately?" Brenda asked.

"Not since we left Moscow," I replied.

Brenda got a blank look on her face, as if she were in deep concentration.

Luke put his arm around my shoulders and I ran my arm around his waist. A moment later I heard a familiar voice in my head.

*Daughter, what are you up to now?* It was Antonio, I assumed still in LA helping the prince.

*I glared at Brenda. I'm sorry, sire, I told him respectfully. Brenda had no reason to bring you into this. I know you are otherwise occupied.*

*Christina is determined to avenge Jason's death, I heard Brenda tell him through our telepathic link. She is too close to the situation and I'm afraid she is being reckless given the danger involved.*

*'Martin' is dead?* Antonio asked, the very feel of his words betraying his astonishment.

*I turned and rested my cheek on the fabric of Luke's shirt. His masculine scent surrounded me as his arms came up and pulled me close.*

*I don't think they know that for sure, Brenda replied, but Christina believes he is. She has vowed to find his killers.*

*Childe, perhaps Brenda is right, my sire told me softly. Perhaps the search is better left to those not so close to him.*

*Jason saved my life many times, I communicated to them. We were very close. This is my war. I struggled to keep from crying. How long would Antonio treat me like a childe?*

*If you and Jason were so close, Brenda said, what are you doing in Luke's arms?*

*What? Antonio's surprise came through in his tone, even mentally.*

*Christina has been touchy-feely with Luke since I met up with them tonight, Brenda informed our sire.*

*Jason and I were very close, I repeated firmly, stiffening against Luke's chest. But he is dead now, and it is my responsibility to find whoever did that to him. He's dead and I never told him how I felt and I won't do that again. Don't you understand this is something I have to do?*

*Christina, this is not something that you must do alone, Antonio said, his words slow and patient. If you go into a room with a fifteen round clip and thirty enemies, who is going to walk out alive?*

*Immediately my heart responded before I could block the thought in my mind. Jason would.*

*Silence was their only answer.*

*I looked up at Luke, anguish in my eyes.*

*"What's wrong?" he asked, his hands tightening about me.*

*I shook my head and stepped out of his arms. I looked at Brenda and saw only sadness in her eyes.*

*Childe, I heard Antonio say, don't you think you should let Brenda help you with this when she has found the girl she came to Nashville for? Can't you see you are too emotional at this point to—?*

*"I am not emotional!" I exclaimed, both aloud and mentally to Antonio. Luke took a step back from me, unease written on his face.*

*"My point exactly," Brenda replied, her gaze taking in Luke's quick movement.*

*I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, saying both mentally and aloud, "Look, I am tired of everyone telling me I need to back off, slow down. I'm a big girl now, and I can handle myself."*

*"Christina, you have to be careful—" Brenda began, but I cut her off.*

*"No! I spent my whole life being careful and where did it get me? I was nearly killed in New York, kidnapped and starved in Salem. Jason is dead, and everyone still treats me like a childe. I can handle myself."*

*I turned off the mental links and left the group, desperately needing to think. Could Jason possibly be alive? Was that what the dream had been trying to tell me? Had I been a fool to give up on him so quickly?*

*Luke caught up with me for a moment. "You want to be alone for a while?" When I nodded, he said, "We'll meet you at the park. Are you loaded?"*

*"Don't ask stupid questions," I replied, forcing a wan smile to take the sting from my words. "You know better."*

*Luke grabbed my arm and turned me to face him. "Be careful," he told me, then kissed me gently and let me go.*

As I walked away, I thought of the night I left Salem to return to Vegas. Jason had taken me to the airport, and he, like Luke, had been concerned for my welfare.

*"You will take care of yourself, won't you?" Jason asked.*

*"I will try," I replied. "My life doesn't exactly lend itself to safety."*

*"Promise me you'll be careful," he insisted, touching my face. "You may be beyond such things, but I nearly had a heart attack when I realized you were gone. I care about you."*

*"I will take care," I said, looking into his eyes. "For you." He kissed me gently and watched as I walked onto the plane.*

I could feel Luke's eyes on me as I turned a corner and disappeared from view.

The streets were dark in Nashville's seedy part of town. Many houses were boarded up and abandoned cars seemed to be everywhere. I thought perhaps most mortal women would fear to walk these streets alone, but I was not mortal and there was little I feared.

What did scare me on that dark night was myself. Had I been too quick to believe that Jason was dead? Had I taken the easiest path in my mind? I didn't want to believe that Jason hadn't contacted me yet still lived, but Luke did have a point. What if Jason for whatever reason couldn't reach me?

Antonio's words kept echoing in my mind until I was no longer sure if I was remembering them or if he were repeating them to me. *If you go into a room with a fifteen round clip and thirty enemies, who is going to walk out alive?* Again and again my heart answered, *Jason.*

And what exactly was I doing with Luke? In Moscow, I'd had to behave like his girlfriend, and we'd continued the pretense through the rest of our travels to throw off any suspicion that we were looking for the murderers of the man I loved. It wasn't fair for me to keep behaving like this with him if there were any chance of finding Jason alive.

It had taken me a long time to admit my feelings for Jason. I was at a disadvantage when it came to recognizing love because I didn't know what it was like. I couldn't remember the love of my parents or of family when I was growing up and I had no recollection of boyfriends or even friends to draw from. I had only the experiences of the last five years to help me determine what I felt for Jason. The closest thing to a male-female relationship I'd had other than Jason was what I shared with Luke.

Since we'd left Detroit, Luke and Lena had been my constant companions. After Lena's heartfelt talk in Moscow convincing me to play the girlfriend role, I had gotten used to touching and being touched by Luke. He was almost like a talisman to me now, just feeling his muscles beneath my hand or having his arms around me helped me to find balance, if not peace.

Peace was very hard for me to come by now with the need to find Jason or his killers driving me onward. All I thought about was revenge and my failure to save Jason. I felt a great burden from that failure, knowing that he would have found me within days. Hell, he had when Beth had held me in Salem

Luke was my lifeboat in a sea of guilt: guilt that I'd left Jason to die, guilt that I hadn't found him in time to save his hand, guilt that he may be dead because of my failure to find him. And contrary to what Brenda might have thought, I also felt guilt over my affection for Luke. I hadn't forgotten Jason in any way, or cared any less for him, but I was allowing Luke to comfort me. In my eyes, that made me weak and I was ashamed of that weakness.

I also felt awful for using Luke to get through my pain, but I couldn't quite bring myself to stop. I was adrift with no one to save me from myself. Luke had offered a hand and I'd taken it, holding on for all I was worth.

In the month that he'd been helping Lena and me look for Jason, Luke had never once looked for a response from me that I wasn't willing to give him. So, while we held hands and touched like lovers, even sharing the occasional kiss and the same hotel room most of the time, nothing sexual had ever passed between us.

Luke was convinced we'd find Jason alive, but he had never told me what he thought would happen if we did. He refused to discuss it, always changing the subject when I brought it up. Did he expect me to continue with Jason as I had before? Or did he expect me to stay with him once we'd resolved the search for Jason?

I walked on, oblivious to my surroundings. I opened my heart and let my mind wander back to every moment I'd spent with Jason. For a time I felt as if he walked with me, his hands in his pockets, his face turned up to the light rain that had begun falling, a smile in his eyes.

My tears mingled with the rain and I dashed them away abruptly. My movement broke the spell and Jason was gone.

# THE PARK

No, I don't feel a thing  
Life's going by me  
Mistakes - Godsmack

The rain had stopped by the time I entered the park from the north. I was startled to see Brenda standing behind a wrecked Cadillac trying to force the trunk open.

"Brenda," I said, startling her, "what's up?"

She spun at my voice. "We're trying to find someone and that bastard knows where she is." She gestured toward Bruce where he stood over another Kindred staked on the ground that I recognized as the Wyatt, the Brujah primogen. I noticed then that Wyatt resembled Bruce very closely. The prince lay on the ground near him, dazed.

"Are you making a habit of this, Brenda?" I asked, my mouth quirked in an attempted smile as she turned back to the trunk.

I spotted Luke and walked across the park road to stand by his side. He was watching Micky George kick the Brujah and hadn't noticed yet that I was there. After a moment I tentatively reached out and touched his arm, desperately needing his strength. He spun, surprised, and I took a step back.

"Oh, babe," he said. "Sorry. You startled me." Then he turned back without touching me to watch Lena touch first the Brujah, then the prince. I knew she was trying to get information from them.

Disappointed, I walked away and sat on the hood of our rental car. After a while I covered my ears with my hands, still trying desperately to stop Antonio's words from replaying in my mind, and from hearing my heart's reply.

I jerked when I felt a hand on my knee and looked up to see Luke standing before me.

"Come on," he said. "They think they know where the girl is." He picked me up and set me on my feet, casually throwing an arm around my shoulders. The moment he touched me, Antonio's voice faded from my mind.

We followed the others as they walked through the woods led by Charisma and Gabriel. Bruce, carrying the Brujah Primogen, joked with Micky and I realized that Bruce too was from Salem.

Charisma turned on a flashlight and led us into a hidden cave and we began to descend a long tunnel. Luke kissed my cheek soon after we went underground, then elbowed his way to the front of the group. I ended up walking between two of Micky's friends, Nez and Tor.

Something about the three of them tugged at my mind. Then suddenly, I knew where I had seen them before; they were all members of The Jesters, a music group that had been popular in the 60's. I had watched reruns of their television show my whole childhood with... I couldn't remember who I'd watched it with, but at least I'd remembered the band. I looked up at them knowingly.

We continued moving into the earth led alternately by Lena's psychic abilities, Luke's tracking, and Charisma's friend Walter's nose; Walter apparently was a werewolf. At one point, Luke, Walter, Gabriel and Charisma went ahead and cleared the passage of four Brujah that were guarding it. When the rest of the group joined them, I watched a bullet wound on Walter's shoulder close by itself.

Ahead we could see the flicker of torches. As we entered a large cave, Micky moved forward too quickly and was attacked by what looked like a hideously deformed Nosferatu. Charisma struck with a stake and the creature fell to the ground, immobile.

As I followed Lena into the chamber, I was overcome by an overwhelming feeling of sadness. Lena fell to her knees and I knelt by her side, holding her head as she retched helplessly on the floor. It took her several long minutes to recover from the aura of the place, and by that time, Micky and Bruce had released a short blond girl who could only be the Sarah they'd been looking for from a cage on the far side of the room.

Holding Lena in my arms, I watched as they led Sara over to the Brujah primogen and encouraged her to feed. When she did so, I caught the same expression on her face that I had seen on Michael's when he had fed on the Salem prince in the dungeon.

I turned away, tears filling my eyes at the reminder of Jason. I remembered lying in the cell in Beth's dungeon, looking at Brenda's father and feeling the hunger rage within me.

*Turning my head slowly, I looked through the bars into the hall. When I realized who was there, I carefully rose to my feet and walked with great hesitation to the bars. I could hardly believe my eyes.*

*"This," Beth said, "is my insurance."*

*Brenda stood back from the bars staring toward her father in the inner cell, her dark hair falling past her shoulders. Michael stood at her elbow looking impassionately around the cell, his frigid blue eyes briefly meeting mine before moving on. But what cut me to the bone was the way Antonio, my own sire, looked at me coldly with his dark eyes, then seemed to dismiss my presence.*

*"You think this one's safety will entice me to do your will?" he said, his voice icy and hard.*

*"Actually, I do," Beth replied, her voice just as crisp as she moved to the bars where I stood. "Christina has been very strong since she has been here. Although she has not been given nourishment, she has resisted feeding." She shook her head as if she couldn't understand my behavior.*

*Brenda seemed to get a hold of herself after a quick look at Michael. Her face became carefully blank while both Michael and Antonio simply looked bored.*

*"She is of no consequence to me," Antonio stated, his normally slight Spanish accent strong.*

*"Antonio!" I cried, stricken. I couldn't believe he was abandoning me to this horrible fate. I was completely devastated.*

*"Sit down and be silent, childe," he barked at me in a tone that would brook no disobedience.*

*I walked reluctantly over to the cot and sat, blood tears filling my eyes and spilling down my cheeks. It was the first time I had allowed myself to cry since being in the cell and I knew I couldn't resist another night of hunger.*

*I jumped as I watched long claws rake Beth's face and neck, knocking her to the ground. The smell of Kindred blood filled the air and I saw Antonio standing over her, the long sharp talons that now extended from his fingers red and dripping.*

*Hunger rose and nearly consumed me.*

*Before Antonio could move in for the kill, Michael was on Beth's prone body, striking her repeatedly, stopping only when she ceased struggling and slipped into unconsciousness.*

*In the silence, we heard Lucy crying from the other end of the hall. "Check it out," Michael said to Brenda and Antonio.*

*After a warm apologetic look to me that I did my best to ignore, Antonio led Brenda down the hall.*

*Michael bent over the fallen woman and buried his face in her neck. When he sat up several minutes later, his blond hair spilled over his forehead and I could see that his face was filled with exaltation. Michael hopped up and looked questioningly at him.*

*"A child," Antonio said to Michael's unspoken question. Antonio approached my cell and tried to put a hand through the bars, only to pull it back quickly, as if bitten.*

*"She warded the cell," I said coldly from the cot.*

*"Are you all right?" He asked me softly.*

*"Do you care?" I said bitterly, staring at the blood that lay on the floor at his feet, smelling it, craving it. It had run toward my cell, but stopped at the bars, held by whatever Beth had used to ward the cell. If the blood had entered my cell, I knew I would have been on my knees licking it up.*

*"Childe, you know better." He shook his head. "Should I have let her know how much I care for you? Let her win? She is dead now, can't you understand my actions and forgive?"*

*I knew he was right, that circumstances had forced him to treat me that way. I nodded slowly and rose to walk over to where he stood. Quietly I wiped the blood tears from my face.*

*"Now, Christina, are you all right?" he asked again.*

*"I hunger," I whispered softly. "I don't know how much longer I can stand this."*

*Antonio and Michael both spun at a small sound from the hallway to the right, pulling their guns. Brenda moved back around the corner, also drawing a small pistol. After a moment the three of them relaxed and put their guns away.*

*"What are you doing here?" asked Michael.*

*"Christina," I heard a familiar voice say.*

*"Jason," I breathed almost inaudibly.*

*"She is here," Antonio said, gesturing toward me. "Be careful, the cell is warded."*

*I watched Jason closely as he approached the cell, my eyes drinking in every bit of his appearance. He lifted his hands and held them near the bars.*

*"Martin," I said, very glad to see him.*

*"Christina." He looked at me for a long moment and his brown eyes seemed to see every detail. "Are you well? Have you been harmed?"*

*"I haven't been harmed," I told him and tried to smile.*

*"She is hungry," Antonio said. "We need to get her away from that mortal."*

*Jason looked over at Brenda's father, then back at me. "I'll get you out," he said.*

*He turned to Antonio who had pulled his sword and was poking at the area around the cell lock. Sparks flew. As Antonio sheathed his sword, he told Jason that he could open the cell with an ancient ritual that would take two hours to perform.*

*"We may not have that long," Jason said gravely, glancing at my face.*

*"It is the best I can do," Antonio replied shortly.*

*"Yes," Jason said, and walked down the hall.*

*I heard him enter the cell next to mine and I began to pace, alternately watching Antonio working his spell and Jeffrey asleep on his cot, trying to ignore the hunger burning deep within me. I looked at Beth, lying on the floor, blood pooling around her. My mouth seemed to water as the smell of her blood and that of the others stung my nostrils and fought to control myself. The knowledge that Brenda's father was within my reach echoed through my brain.*



*Michael and Brenda managed to bend the bars of Lucy's cell to get her out. She seemed fine but hungry, and kept calling Michael 'Superman.'*

*Jason came strolling back from the direction of the other cell and I admired his stride even as I felt the pull of his blood and my hunger rose again.*

*"Everyone move away," he said briskly. "Christina, pull up the mattress and move against the other cell. Get that man awake and have him move against the far wall with his mattress."*

*As Jeffrey and I waited for the explosion, I could smell his blood, sweat and fear. I was too close to him; I could feel the hunger pulsing like a living being within me. I closed my eyes and fought for some semblance of control.*

*Suddenly the world shattered. My ears rang from the blast, and I felt multiple impacts on my body through the protection of the mattress. Jeffrey was barely hit because I was between him and the explosion.*

*When the fallout was over, I threw the mattress aside and turned. Standing at the gaping hole in the cell wall was Jason, tall and strong. He met me half way across the room, pulled me into his arms and held me closely.*

*"Jason," I whispered very softly, reveling in the feel of his arms around me.*

*He spoke soft words of reassurance in my ear but the scent of his blood, the smell both hot and sweet, hit me like a runaway train. I pulled away from him to put distance between us, hunger burning in my eyes.*

*Without a word, he offered his neck to me.*

*"I'm afraid," I said, taking another step back. "I don't want to hurt you."*

*"I trust you, Christina," he said softly. "You need this."*

*I looked into his eyes for a long moment, my reason warring with the craving for blood. Hesitantly I stepped back into his arms. I pressed my lips to the pulse point that beat beneath his skin, then gently sank my teeth into his skin.*

*The hot, sharp taste of his blood filled my mouth, human blood with the slight tint of Kindred vitae. After drinking for several moments, I pulled away, licking his skin lingeringly to seal the wound. Then I turned my face and laid it on his shoulder.*

*"Thank you," I whispered.*

When Lena had recovered enough to stand, I realized Luke was gone. I looked around for him in time to see him and Brenda returning from a passage on the far side of the chamber. For the first time I noticed that hanging from the ceiling of the cave were decaying bodies that all seemed to have been Kindred.

Luke took Lena's other arm and together we helped her leave the chamber with the rest of the group. We found our way out easily as one of Charisma's friends had marked arrows on the tunnel walls at each branch off.

When we returned to where we had left our cars, we saw that the bodies of the prince and the Brujah Primogen, both killed by Charisma, had been removed and that the wrecked Cadillac was gone.

Luke walked toward the river to wash away the worst of the blood that was on him and I followed. He bent to scoop water up and rubbed away most of the blood from his arms and hands.

When he stood he opened his arms to me and I walked into them without hesitation. We stood that way for a moment and I took from him what comfort I could. It had hurt me to see Micky and Sarah reunited, knowing that Jason was still very much out of my reach.

Hand in hand we walked back to the cars just as Brenda's cell phone began ringing.

# THE CALL

So you think you'll wish it all away  
Click your heels and leave it all behind  
Give Our Love a Fightin' Chance - Cher

"Faith." Brenda said into the receiver once she'd identified the speaker.

Brenda shot me a puzzled look. "Yes, she's here with me. A package? Of course, we'll come right now." She hung up her phone and looked at me.

"Who knows you're in town?" she asked me.

I glanced at Luke and shrugged. "Faith and whoever was here tonight. The people following us, I'm sure. Why?"

"You have a package waiting for you at the Chantry," she told me.

I frowned. "A package?"

"Yes," she replied, "apparently a very large gentleman on a very large motorcycle and wearing a leather jacket dropped it off for you this evening."

Lena stepped forward, hope lighting up her face. "Graves?"

Brenda shrugged. "Faith didn't give me a name."

Bruce hung up the phone he'd been talking on and turned to Micky. "Elvira requests that we return to Salem tonight," he said with some humor in his voice. "She wants to talk to you about the security of the downstairs cells."

Micky groaned and Sarah laughed.

"Micky," Brenda said, "why don't you take the plane and head back home. Bruce can go with you. I'll come as soon as this business with Christina is finished."

I looked up at Luke. "Who could have sent me a package?"

"It's almost Christmas," he replied, "maybe Santa?"

Brenda turned back to us. "Can you follow me back to the Chantry?"

Lena nodded and went for the car. Luke and I walked over to his bike as Brenda got behind the wheel of a red Grand Am. She pulled out of the park with Lena following. I climbed on behind Luke and we took up the rear.

Ten minutes later we pulled up the Chantry drive and approached its closed gates. As we got closer, they slowly swung open. When we pulled through them, the tingling in my arm returned. I was glad we'd discovered and moved the crystal in Moscow.

Luke parked the bike and I climbed off, itching at the place on my arm where the crystal was embedded. We walked with Lena to the porch of the two-story house, joining Brenda before going to the door.

A young Tremere male opened the door, his clothes a study of 90's teen fashion. He wore baggy black pants, white T-shirt and a black sports jacket.

"Brenda," he said to her while looking at Lena and I. Then he looked back at me and said, "This is Christina?"

I nodded, looking back at him questioningly.

"I'm Nick," he said. "Faith is waiting for you in the living room." He motioned me toward a pair of closed panel doors.

I looked at Luke and he began to follow us. Nick stopped just before opening the doors.

"Only you," he told me.

I reached back and Luke took my hand. "There is nothing for me that Luke can't see or hear," I said softly, clutching his hand nervously.

Nick shrugged and slid the doors open just enough for us to enter, then pulled them closed behind us, remaining in the hall. I looked around the room and saw Faith with a very large, burly Kindred I took at first sight to be Gangrel or Brujah. He wore a heavy leather jacket and looked like a body builder. His hair was long and blond and he had piercing blue eyes.

Luke stopped suddenly and looked shocked. Startled, I asked him what was wrong, but he didn't answer.

"It's good to finally meet you, Christina," the tall blond told me in a deep masculine voice.

"I might say the same if I knew who you were," I replied politely.

He grinned down at me. "You might say that I'm Jason's supplier."

My legs became weak and I swayed on my feet. Luke put his hands on my upper arms to steady me or I would have fallen. He led me over to the couch and eased me down, then sat beside me and held my hand.

I looked at the tall Kindred, taking in every inch of his nearly seven feet and knew that I was seeing Graves for the first time. I remembered that this was also Lena's Talon. I also noticed him looking resentfully at Luke.

"You may recall meeting Luke a few months ago," I said, struggling to keep my voice steady and strong. "He's my friend."

"So I see," Graves replied sarcastically.

"I doubt it," I told him simply. I doubted he could see much beyond himself.

We stared at each other for a moment until he saw that although I was afraid of him I wasn't going to drop my eyes. He smiled and his face transformed into something I knew Lena would want to experience.

I said, "Lena will want to see you."

He shook his head and his smile disappeared. "I can't right now."

"I think it's important she see you." He shook his head again, and looked away. "Do you at least have a message I can give her?" I asked.

After a moment he reached up and took off the necklace he wore, refastening the clasp and handing it to me. "Tell her I'll call her soon, if everything works out."

I looked down at the necklace taking in its heavy chain and ornate cross. It looked similar to a smaller one Lena often wore. I slid it into my pocket and looked back up at Graves.

"The package, Graves," Faith said quietly but not too patiently. I had forgotten she was in the room after seeing Graves, and she didn't look too happy to have not one but two Gangrel in her living room.

He shot a glance in her direction and reached behind him to pick up a small shoebox sized package from a table. He walked over to me and held it out. It was wrapped in plain brown paper and tied with a string. Across the top of the package in precise black letters was my name.

I tried to take it from him, but tears filled my eyes and my hands shook. Luke caught the package before I could drop it and sat it down gently in my lap, earning another hostile look from Graves.

I looked at the package, not really seeing it through my tears. "Where did you get this?" I questioned of Graves.

"I was asked to bring it to you," he replied, his voice low and gruff.

"By whom?" I demanded, looking up at him and blinking my tears away. When it became clear that he wouldn't answer me, I looked back down at the writing. This time I recognized the handwriting but when I looked up, Graves was gone.

I turned to look at Luke and my voice shook as I said, "It's Jason's writing."

Luke touched my arm softly. "Open it, Christina."

I looked back at the package and ran my fingers lightly over the letters Jason had written. Carefully I slipped off the string and began to remove the brown paper and reveal the box inside. I lifted the lid and found white tissue paper inside. As I raised the top sheet, I gasped at the sight of Jason's solid gold cross necklace, the one he never removed, ever.

I picked up the Celtic style cross and held it in my hand, studying it. I had never once seen Jason without the cross; even sleeping he still wore it. I couldn't begin to imagine why he'd send it to me. I closed my fingers around the cross and its corners dug into the palm of my hand.

I reached into the box and moved aside more of the tissue paper to find a cell phone identical to the one I carried. I knew that Jason used that particular model exclusively.

Slowly I picked it up and flipped the cover down. A small note was stuck to the buttons that read "Hit Redial."

I looked at Luke, puzzled, then up at Faith. "Could you give us a minute?" I asked her.

"Sure," she said, and stepped to the other side of the room.

I removed the note and placed it in the box, still clutching the cross. Then I turned the phone on and pressed the redial button. I heard ringing on the other end of the line and had almost given up hope anyone would answer when finally someone did.

"Hello?"

I didn't recognize the rough voice, but it did sound familiar. "Hello?" I whispered.

"Christina?" I heard hope in that voice, but still didn't know who it was.

"Who is this?" I demanded.

The voice became softer then, and said, "Don't you know?"

Shock ran through me like a tidal wave. "Jason?" I stared at Luke, completely stunned. I could see that Luke was saying something, but my whole world focused on the voice that spoke in my ear.

Very quietly I heard, "Are you still there?"

"Yes," I managed to say, still very much confused.

"Are you all right?" Jason sounded very concerned.

"No," I told him. "Where are you?"

"I can't tell you that," he said, and I heard sadness in his voice, deep sadness.

"Why?"

"I don't know myself."

"What?"

"Listen, Christina, a lot has happened to me in the last month, too many things."

I nearly laughed, relieved to know for sure that Jason really was still alive. "When did those things happen, when you were 'Martín,' or 'Philippe,' or Jason?"

He laughed hoarsely, then I heard him break into a phlegmy cough.

"Are you okay?" I asked, anxious for his health. "Where are you?"

"I can't tell you that." Jason's voice had returned to the rough tone that I'd heard when he'd first answered the phone.

"Why didn't you call me sooner?"

"I couldn't."

I was beginning to get angry with him for refusing to give me more information or tell me where he was, and I'm sure it showed in my voice. "Why are you calling me now?"

He hesitated, then said, "I just wanted you to know I was all right."

"Jason, tell me where you are, please," I begged.

"I can't, Christina." He sounded as if he was in pain and tears began to prick my eyes again.

"You don't understand, Jason, I have to see you!" I knew I was raising my voice, but I needed to be with him so much that I ached.

I froze at his answer; his voice was so cold and firm. "No."

"Jason, I—"

"Things have changed, Christina. I may be disappearing forever."

"No, Jason, you can't!" To finally talk to him again and then lose him forever....

"I'm dead to the world now." He sounded so sad, so lost.

"I'm dead, Jason, but I still want to see you."

"You're not at final death."

*My God, I thought, what could have happened to make Jason, my laughing Jason who had always been so full of life, feel this way? "You're not either." Final death?*

"I'm close. Look, I can't see you, Christina. I care too much about you to put you through this." His voice broke from his emotions, but I was getting angry again.

My hand tightened painfully on the phone. "If you cared about me, you wouldn't be putting me through this now!"

"I can't—"

"And if you don't care about me, what about Lena?" I asked him. "She has been beside herself with worry over you."

Now Jason was angry. "And where have you been? From what I understand, you've moved on."

For the first time I thought about what the relationship Luke and I had might look like to Jason. I tried to speak, to explain, but he kept talking over my words.

"I'll call you. Keep the phone."

When I heard him disconnect, I hung up and hit redial again. Almost immediately I got a buzzing in my ear and an automated operator telling me the number I had dialed was disconnected.

Slowly and with great care I hung up the phone and closed the cover. I put it back in the box and with that same extreme care handed the box to Luke. I got up with precise, steady movements. I felt as if I was going to shatter from the pain and anger that burned in my heart.

Jason was alive! He was alive and refused to see me. He was alive and I had to find him, now. I needed so much to be with him and finally tell him how I felt about him.

I walked slowly to the door and opened it carefully. When I didn't see Lena, I asked Brenda where she was. Brenda motioned toward the front door, clearly taken aback at the look on my face.

Again moving with great care, I opened the door and stepped onto the porch, finding Lena sitting in a rocking chair and staring off into the distance.

"Lena, what's wrong?" I asked, finally starting to calm.

Lena shook her head and continued to stare off. I crouched by her side and took her hand.

"Jason is alive," I told her. She looked at me. "I just talked to him."

Lena threw her arms around me, suddenly laughing. I held her for a moment, then stood. I turned to see Luke standing behind me with the box still in his hands.

"We have to find him," I said firmly.

"I think I have an idea where he is," Faith told us.

I looked at her intently. "Where?"

"It's just a rough idea," she said, taking a step back.

"Where."

"San Francisco."

I nodded. It made sense, Jason lived there, he knew Kindred in the area. *Final death*. He had to be Kindred now, to use that term toward himself. I closed my eyes and the dream I'd had of the warehouse cage flashed through my mind.

I felt pain in my palm and looked down to see blood dripping from my clenched hand. I reached into my pocket and pulled out the necklace Graves had given to me and handed it to Lena.

As she took it from me, I said, "Graves wanted me to give this to you and tell you he would call you soon if everything works out." She turned to glare down the drive, and I knew she'd seen Graves leaving.

"Tell me what Jason said to you," Lena asked quietly.

With a glance at Brenda and Luke, I repeated much of the conversation. When I was done, everyone was quiet.

My arm began to tingle again and idly I itched at the crystal, staring off into the trees for several minutes, remembering my dream of the day before. I was so tempted to use the crystal to find Jason, but perhaps there was another way....

"Lena, could you call the airport and make arrangements to fly to Detroit tonight?" I asked her after a time. "I need to return this damn thing."

"Sure," she replied.

I turned to see Brenda looking at us questioningly. "A crystal," I told her. "It belongs to the Chantry Regent in Detroit. Could you walk with me a moment?" I had to ask her about something she'd said at The Iron.

She followed me down the walk and over to a tall willow tree near the Chantry fence. "What's up?"

I looked at Jason's cross for a moment, studying the design, then put it on. I licked my hand to close the wounds and absently itched at the crystal. "Why did you ask how many times I'd fed from Luke?"

She blinked in surprise at my question. "The Blood Bond. You know, makes you crazy?"

"Yeah," I replied, "but that's if you drink three times, isn't it?"

"Three times for the full bond," she told me, "But every time you drink from any given Kindred on a different night, it makes you care more about them.

"One drink is kind of like a crush, you want to be around the guy, spend time with him. One drink you can get over pretty easily." She shot me a serious look. "I know you've fed from him once, Chris. I was there." That had been the night in San Francisco I'd met my father.

"The second drink is more serious," she continued. "The Kindred you drink from can easily influence your decisions and behavior. It's a lot harder to get over that one.

"Drink a third time and you get the full bond, like you're crazy in love and can't get out of it. That person you drink from, the Domitor, becomes the most important person in the world to you, more important than your friends or your family, sometimes even your life."

She paused and glanced back at the porch where Luke and Lena stood talking to Nick and Faith. "There are only a few ways to break a blood bond," she warned me. "The embrace breaks it instantly. Christina, most of the time the Domitor has to die for a Kindred to break the blood bond."

I knew the blood bond was strong, I'd just never realized how strong, or known about the varying degrees. Now I understood why Jason was always so quick to do what Graves asked of him. I felt a great resentment rise within me; was Graves the reason Jason refused to see me?

I looked over at Luke and remembered that I had my own blood bond to think about, but he seemed unaware of my gaze. According to Brenda's explanation, having fed from Luke twice in the last six months I was now more susceptible to his suggestions.

But something didn't make sense to me: why hadn't Luke tried to give me that third drink? Was he unaware of the bond he'd begun? Moreover, had he really asked me to do anything, anything at all that wasn't strictly for my own good? What had Luke actually tried talking me in to? Feeding regularly? Believing the man I loved was still alive? Taking comfort from his strength? How had anything he'd done in the last month been solely for his own benefit? I couldn't believe that he enjoyed being with a woman who did nothing but cry over another man.

"You haven't...?" Brenda asked.

"Look, can you go to Detroit with us?" I took her hand and looked at her pleadingly. "I need a little moral support right now and I probably should back off from Luke."

She smiled, squeezing my hand in return. "Anything you need, sister."

We walked back to the porch and joined the others. After a brief goodbye to Faith and Nick, I climbed into the back of our rental car. Brenda and Lena got into the front, the later driving. Luke got on his motorcycle and we followed him toward the hotel.

The car rocked in a gentle motion as I pulled a small bag out from between my breasts. In the dim light from the passing cars, I spilled the rings Jason and I had worn into my hand. For a long moment I sat and looked at the rings, thinking about the talk I'd just had with Jason. It was still a shock to me that he was actually alive.

I took my ring and slid it back on my hand. The diamonds sparkled brightly for a moment in the dim interior of the car. I tried to put Jason's ring on my middle finger, but it was too big. I reached down, pulled my knife out of my boot, and carefully slit a piece of fabric from the lining of my jacket. Brenda glanced into the back seat as I twisted the fabric tightly and wrapped it around the band, tied a secure knot to hold it and slid the ring on my left middle finger.

I put my hand around the cross and heard a tiny click. I picked up the cross to examine it closer and realized that on the right side of the cross was a tiny hinge, on the left a smaller clasp. I tripped the clasp and the cross fell open in my hands.

While the outside of the cross was covered with Celtic knot work, the inside was ornately carved with wildflowers and leaves. With a start, I noticed the pattern was similar to the ring I wore.

Inside the cross were fifteen small beads, three on each shorter cross section, five on the bottom longer section, and one placed squarely in the middle. The car passed under a streetlight and I saw that seven of the beads seemed to swirl in a hypnotizing cloud-like pattern.

Gently I ran my fingers across the beads and got an instant head rush. I'd been lying to Luke about my feeding for the last five nights but now somehow I was completely full. I looked back at the beads and now only two swirled back at me.



I put my head back and closed my eyes, struggling to get a handle on the thrill I'd just received. It was like inadvertently drinking from a drug addict, and just as frightening. Somehow I felt stronger somehow, faster.

I looked back down at the cross and knew this must have been where Jason kept his 'employer's' blood supply. My eyes narrowed as I realized that I had effectively taken the first drink from Graves, if in fact it was his blood in the beads.

Lena took a sudden turn and reached up to touch the area behind her left ear twice. "Luke," she said urgently.

I quickly switched my device to listen and heard, "—ya need?"

"We're being followed and it's not by our usual tails." Lena kept checking her mirrors and I turned to see a dark car following us. It looked like the one that had been wrecked in the park earlier.

In my ear, I heard Luke's bike start up. "I'm at the hotel, where are you?"

Lena made a quick turn, and said, "We're just a few minutes from the hotel and coming up to the cemetery on Fourth Street."

The engine of the Harley began to whine and I made sure both of my guns were fully loaded as Luke told Lena he would meet us there.

# LUKE

God is a buffet

Have mercy on us everyone

God Is A Buffet - Concrete Blonde

Lena made a quick right into the cemetery and cut the lights. Brenda and I turned to see the black car continue past the exit. Lena drove over to the large mausoleum in the middle of the grounds and parked behind it.

The three of us got out of the car quickly. I motioned Brenda to watch from the left side of the mausoleum while Lena and I went to the right. Because I didn't want to see her hurt, I whispered to Lena that she should stay behind me.

From behind us, I heard the distant roar of Luke's motorcycle. I watched the headlight turn into the cemetery's third entrance, then turn off. A moment later I heard a crash and the engine cut to a low drone. Frightened, I ran toward the sound, softly calling Luke's name but getting no response from the device behind my ear.

I dodged headstones, pumping my legs as fast as they would go. I was terrified that I would be too late to help Luke, as I had been too late for Jason. Ahead I saw shadowy figures and fired at one, surprised when a hole shone through the middle but it didn't drop.

I saw Luke's bike, the engine still running, crumpled against a tombstone. As I approached it, the rear wheel rolled to a stop. A dark heap that could only have been Luke's leather jacket lay on the ground beside it.

From behind me I heard the cocking of a pistol and dodged to my left. I didn't quite make it behind the nearest headstone before I felt a bullet enter my lower back and I spun in mid air, landing hard on my back. I moaned and sat up, using the stone as a shield in front of me.

More shots rang out and I saw Lena fall, blood flying from her shoulder. I didn't see Brenda at all.

Abruptly the unmistakable sound of a Skorpion light machine gun resounded through the night. I had just spotted six assailants and now one of them went down. I raised up and fired, dropping another. From my right, I heard a pistol shot and yet another one went down, firing as he fell.

I raised up to fire again and was thrown back against the next row of headstones as a phosphorous round exploded in my shoulder. An agonized cry rang out and I identified the voice as Luke's. Quickly I used the blood inside me to partially heal myself and sat up, ready to fire again.

Two of the bad guys were standing close together and as I watched the ground beneath them rise and a tall figure raked long claws through their backs. In a moment I realized that Luke had come out of the ground beneath them, obviously in full frenzy.

I took careful aim at the last assassin standing and pulled the trigger before I saw Luke move into my path of fire. The bullet grazed him and exploded in a tree as Luke reached the guy and drove his hands through his chest, ripping out his heart and killing him instantly. Then to my horror I watched Luke collapse on the ground.

I ran to Luke's side and called for Brenda to bring me one of the bodies. Quickly I flipped open the cross at my breast and ran my fingers across the two remaining clouded beads. Again I felt the rush that came from ingesting a low generation Kindred's blood. I bit roughly into my wrist and brought it dripping to Luke's mouth.

"Drink, damn it," I hissed at him desperately. "You Gangrel son-of-a-bitch, don't die on me now!"

Luke rolled his head a little, turning away from my arm. I slapped him sharply and pressed my wrist back to his lips, terrified that he would die before I could give him the blood he so desperately needed.

"Drink," I said again, and slowly, he did. I heard a gunshot nearby and turned to see Brenda dragging one of the bodies toward me. Gratefully I grabbed the Brujah's wrist and drank greedily.

A few of Luke's wounds began to close slightly, then stopped. I was briefly reassured when he sucked harder at my wrist, pulling the blood more quickly into himself. I finished what vitae was in the corpse and threw the wrist away from me. Brenda was already firing into another body to make sure it was dead and began to drag it over to me.

The sound of a car made me look up after I bit into the next wrist. I saw our rental car making its way slowly through the cemetery, its parking lights on. My eyes narrowed as I spotted a man standing close to where Lena parked the car. A glimmer of light revealed what appeared to be a ring on the man's left hand.

Lena stepped from the car and fired her gun, hitting the man in the leg and dropping him to the ground.

I tossed the arm I'd been drinking from to the ground and gently pulled away from Luke, licking my wrist healed. His color was a little better and I asked Brenda to see that Luke fed more while I dashed to the man who now lay prone on the grass.

"Don't move," I growled as I pointed a pistol at his face. The misshapen Kindred stopped moving. "Put your hands where I can see them."

Slowly the Nosferatu put his hands behind his head. As he moved them, I saw that the ring did in fact bear the Verbena symbol.

Lena walked over and searched him quickly for weapons, but found none. As she moved away, I saw a hideous scar on his neck, as if something had torn into his throat before his embrace.

"Can you talk?" Lena asked him. He shook his head no.

"Shall we shoot him and see if he screams?" I ask Lena only half in jest.

Suddenly he began to melt into the ground and I fired nearly directly into his chest. As the bullet exploded, I recognized him as the same Nosferatu that Luke and I had fought with at Bruckman's in Moscow. Within seconds he had melted into the ground and was gone.

I cursed inwardly that we hadn't been able to get any information out of him.

I turned and walked to Luke's side where Brenda told me she had gotten him to feed a little more, but that he had again fallen unconscious. There was blood on his face and down his left side. His left leg was bent at an unnatural angle and he was bleeding from several other small cuts, including the flesh wound my bullet had caused on his upper right arm.

Brenda and I glanced at each other when we heard sirens in the distance. "You get him," she told me, "I'll get his jacket and the saddlebags from the bike."

I bent to pick Luke up and nearly moaned at the pain in my wounded shoulder. I moved quickly to where Lena had opened the back door of the car for me. I set him down gently, then climbed over him into the back seat. Lena got into the passenger's seat slowly, as if she were in great pain. When Brenda returned, she tossed the bags and jacket into my lap and got behind the wheel. In a very short period we were back on Fourth Street and headed for our hotel.

Brenda was on her cell phone before I could open the saddlebags to find something Lena could wear into the hotel to cover her blood stained clothing. As I heard Brenda tell Faith we needed blood brought to the plane, I pulled out the trench coat Lena had bought for Luke in Moscow. When I passed it up to her, I noticed how bad Lena's shoulder was.

It took some doing for me to talk her into feeding from me so that she could heal her shoulder. She was concerned the blood would change her in some way but I was able to reassure her and she drank. I didn't mention the blood bond, simply walked her through the healing process. She jerked violently as the wound closed. I knew she would be stiff for a few days and wear the scar for the rest of her life, but at least she would be able to use the arm.

As Brenda jerked to a stop in front of the hotel, Luke's bags fell to the floor, spilling a sketchbook out onto my feet. When I picked it up it fell open to a drawing of Lenin's Flame in Moscow. I turned the page, curious, and stared down at a portrait of myself.

Luke had captured me perfectly as I stood on a bridge looking out over the Left Bank in Paris. My eyes were dark with sorrow, and tears spilled from my lashes. My lips were pulled down in a frown and my forehead was creased with worry. Sadness radiated from every line of my face.

Intrigued, I looked at the next page where Luke had drawn me by the remains of the Berlin Wall. I was smiling sadly and I realized that he had captured every emotion I remembered feeling in Berlin.

I turned the page once more and saw an unfinished sketch, again of myself. There were marks on the page where it looked like he had erased entire sections many times. Tears filled my eyes as I realized he had tried to draw a happy expression on my face and failed.

Brenda turned a corner a little too quick and Luke groaned. I returned the book to his saddlebag and latched it closed.

I began to peel away Luke's shirt, careful not to jar any of his wounds. I bent over and my hair brushed his chest as I began licking at the many cuts and scrapes to close them. The worst of his gunshot wounds had been partially healed at the cemetery, but there were still many injuries I could turn my attention to. On his side I found a row of furrows my tongue couldn't heal and knew that another Kindred had clawed him.

I rolled him over gently and found where my bullet had creased his arm. Carefully I ran my tongue along the wound, healing it. After tending to the other visible lacerations, I tenderly turned him on his back in the seat. I pulled firmly on his leg to straighten it and grimaced when I heard a loud crack, as if the leg had started to heal in its unnatural position and had broken again when I had wrenched it back into place.

His jeans seemed to have protected his legs from serious injury because I could find no bloodstains on his pants. By this time, Brenda had pulled into the airport and I knew that any other wounds he may have had could wait.

Another vehicle pulled up as I got out of the car and lifted Luke again in my arms, ignoring the pain from my injuries. Brenda walked over to it as I climbed the stairs. I carried him to the back of the plane where, in a small cabin, there was a cot.

I laid him down and stripped him to his underwear, sure that if I had been human I would have blushed. I'd only seen one naked man, Kindred or Kine, in the five years of my remembered existence. After making sure there were no wounds on his legs for me to deal with, I knelt on the floor beside the cot and tried to rouse him. To my dismay he didn't move.

Brenda appeared at my side and handed me a small bag of blood, which I drank from gratefully. I took the next one she offered and drained it as well, frantically trying to think of the best way to feed Luke in his unconscious state.

With shaking hands, I pulled my hair to one side and when I leaned close to Luke's face. My hair fell like a curtain between Brenda and the cot. I tapped his cheek, trying to bring him around.

"Luke," I said loudly, "wake up, you have to feed." He didn't even blink.

I closed my eyes briefly and allowed my forehead to rest on his. Then a thought occurred to me. I bit gingerly into my tongue, and put my mouth over his. I let my blood trickle through his lips and, I hoped, down his throat. I kept trying to coax him to swallow for several minutes, but he didn't respond.

I sat up, slapped him hard, then bent over and tried again. This time he roused slightly and swallowed once, then again. When he wouldn't swallow a third time, I pulled back a little, surprised to find I was crying.

"You can't die on me," I whispered very softly through my tears. "I need you, Luke."

I knew I had to get a lot of blood into him and quickly. The only way I could think of to do that was to intensify the blood in my body. I bowed my head and quickly spoke the words of power that were necessary for the trick and shivered when a shock ran through my system.

"Luke," I whispered, bending over him yet again. "You have to help me here. You need blood. Please, wake up and drink." I bent closer, letting my lips brush against his as I added wryly, "I know you would love this if you would just wake up!"

I fastened my lips to his and let my blood fill his mouth. With agonizing slowness he began to swallow. After a few minutes, a shudder ran through his body, but I continued to feed him. Slowly his arms came around my waist and he pulled me down on top of him. At the same time I heard his leg pop again and felt it straighten properly beneath me.

I pulled back a little and looked down into his eyes. They were opened slightly but still glazed with pain. To my surprise, the pupils were now slitted, like a cat's. Frenzy in his clan left a mark of the beast, and the change in his eyes was his mark. He looked to the side and when hunger blazed on his face, I knew that Lena must have entered the room.

"Brenda," I called quickly, "get Lena out of here!"

As I heard them leave the room, I turned his head back to face me and bit my tongue deeply to open the vein deep inside. I put my mouth on his again and his tongue began to move against mine, gradually turning the feeding into a kiss.

Luke's hands began to caress my back and he deepened the kiss still further. He pulled me closer to him until every inch of me was pressed against every inch of him. My head began to spin; I had never dreamed I could feel this way. My whole body was tingling and my mind drifted for several minutes in a trance-like state. I felt warm and safe in his arms.

Dimly I realized what was happening and reared up to look down at Luke in surprise. He stared back at me in wonder. His arms tightened around me and he whispered, "You're alive!"

I was confused by my emotions, but couldn't honestly say if it was the strange blood within me, or Luke's kiss that had affected me so strongly.

"I'm fine," I told him. "You're the one who's hurt."

I tried to push myself off of him but he wouldn't allow it. Instead, he pulled me down for another kiss. I felt one of his hands tangle in my hair and he tilted my head to get better access to my lips.

The first kiss had been gentle, but the second was entirely different. It was like wildfire burning through my senses. Luke's lips parted mine and his tongue pushed between them, tasting every crevice of my mouth. One of his hands still held my head while the other ran through my hair and down my back.

Within moments I moved restlessly on top of him, scared to let the kiss continue yet afraid to pull away. Passion flared within me, making me tremble with desire. With unsteady hands, I caressed his bare chest and my body cried out for something that Luke's kiss whispered he could give to me.

I came to my senses only when I felt the plane lift off the ground. I shoved hard against his chest, surprising him into releasing me. I rolled away and barely caught myself before I hit the floor.

Quickly I stood and walked to where the briefcase lay on a nearby seat. I took out several bags and refused to meet Luke's eyes as I tossed him one. I sat down as far away from him as I could in the small cabin and from the corner of my eye, I saw him pull a blanket over his lower body. I opened the blood bag and drank it hastily.

When I was done with the blood, I kept my eyes lowered. My head was still spinning from the kiss we'd shared. I was embarrassed by my response to Luke, but I couldn't remember ever having been kissed that way in my life. I felt like a naïve child on the edge of adolescence; had it been more than simple relief that Luke was going to be all right? Was it the partial blood bond he had over me?

I jumped when I realized that Luke had come over to kneel in front of me. He lightly touched my knee and called my name, but I still wouldn't meet his eyes.

"Babe, I'm sorry," he whispered with a catch in his voice. "I had no right to do that to you, I know you just need me to help you find Jason."

Startled, I looked up to see that Luke looked very sad. My eyes filled with tears and he rose to move away but I grabbed his hand. His momentum pulled me to my feet and I stood beside him.

"Jason has nothing to do with this." My voice broke and for a moment I couldn't continue. "I was afraid that you would die and I would lose you. I would have done anything to keep that from happening."

I bent my head to hide my tears and saw the claw marks on his side. I reached out and slowly touched the skin above his wounds. "I tried to lick them closed," I whispered, "but they wouldn't... I was so afraid you would die..." To my shame blood tears began to fall down my cheeks.

Luke drew me close to him and I put my arms around his neck, careful not to jar his injuries.

"I thought you were dead," Luke whispered softly against my hair. I felt moisture at my temple and knew he was crying too.

"I couldn't die," I told him simply. "You needed me."

I felt confident that Luke would be okay. I knew that he had used and lost a lot of blood during the fight, and used even more afterwards to heal himself. If I hadn't been there to force him to feed, he probably would have fallen into torpor or died. My hands still trembled with the fear I had felt when I couldn't get him to drink. I didn't want to think that perhaps the trembling was due to the kiss we'd shared.

We held each other close for a long time, each of us needing the reassurance that the other was still alive.

While Luke went into the plane's small bathroom to shower, I sat down on the cot and leaned against the side of the plane. I felt every injury that hadn't fully healed remind me they were there and used the blood I needed to take care of them.

I tried to keep my mind off of Jason, but I kept hearing his voice. He'd said he'd call me, but what assurance did I have that he would? Didn't men use that line all the time?

And why didn't he want to see me? We had grown very close over the months we'd spent together, and I knew he cared deeply for me. His gift of the cross and reference to final death led me to believe he'd been embraced, that he was now Kindred. That didn't matter to me and he should know that, unless.... Who had embraced him? What clan was he? I remembered the hoarseness of his voice; could it have been the Kindred I'd shot tonight? Nosferatu undergo a

serious change after their embrace, they grow ugly and deformed. Could that be what he was trying to spare me from?

I shook my head to clear my thoughts and covered my eyes, only to be swept with shame when I remembered the kiss Luke and I had shared. How could I respond so passionately to one man when I loved another?

I felt as if there was no drop of Tremere blood left within me. I had been shot and healed myself, fed Lena and Luke a large amount of blood. I had absorbed blood from the cross, and drank from first the Brujah at the cemetery and then the blood bags. I was sure I had done a complete transfusion on myself that night.

I definitely felt unlike my usual self. The blood from the cross had awakened a wildness within me, calling to my instincts and the beast within. After the gunfight, the blood from the bodies had filled me with a rage I had difficulty controlling. It made it easy for me to be very angry with Jason that he didn't trust me enough to let me be with him or at least tell me where he was.

I pulled out my cell phone and put a call in to the Countess, who was very happy to hear I had found her crystal and was on my way to give it back to her.

Later I took my turn in the shower. When I was done, I dressed myself quickly and used a blow dryer on my hair until it settled around my shoulders like a mantle. I dressed for comfort and ease more than anything else just in case there was more trouble when we reached Detroit. When I walked into the main cabin, Luke gave a whistle low enough to not wake Lena.

"I've never seen you look so... wild," he commented with a smile, his cat's eyes admiring my form.

"Yes," Brenda said a bit disapprovingly, "almost Gangrel."

I glanced down at the close fitting black jeans and tall spiked boots I'd donned, touching the neckline of the dark tank top the material of which I could see now was almost sheer. Underneath I had put on a black bra and it was just visible beneath the fabric of the top. Jason's cross hung between my breasts, calling attention to my cleavage.

I looked quickly at Luke, my fingers finding the ring on my hand as if I'd never stopped wearing it.

"You look great, babe," he said, winking at me, "don't let her bother you."

Self-conscious, I walked to a storage closet and pulled out a large leather jacket that I had purchased in Berlin, slipping it on over the skimpy top. "Better?" I asked Brenda.

"Much," Luke replied, but Brenda just rolled her eyes and went into the back of the plane to clean up.

When she returned, I shared my thoughts about Jason's probable embrace and possible clan. Brenda agreed it was the only logical explanation, but Luke didn't say a word. He held my hand while Brenda and I talked, giving me the strength and courage I needed to discuss the subject without being overwhelmed by my emotions.

Twenty minutes before we landed in Detroit, I shook Lena awake gently. She showered and changed and by the time we landed in Detroit, we were all ready to see the Countess.

# OLD ACQUAINTANCES

Under wandering stars I've grown  
By myself but not alone  
Wherever I May Roam - Metallica

A car was waiting for us when we landed and took us quickly to the Tremere Chantry. The driver led us up to the door and into the foyer, continuing on to the living room where Lena and I had talked to the Countess on our last visit. Victoria sat regally in her chair and Paige stood quietly at her shoulder.

When I stepped forward to kiss her hand, the Countess asked me in a low voice what I was wearing. I looked away from her sharp gaze and told her an abbreviated story of the events in Nashville.

"I'm sorry, milady," I whispered. "I was thinking of combat, not etiquette."

"See that next time you do not forget," she told me in a stern tone, still low enough not to be overheard by anyone but Paige.

I introduced Brenda and Luke to the Countess and she greeted them formally before turning back to me.

"The crystal, my dear?"

I glanced at Luke then bent to pull a knife out of my boot. I took my left arm out of the jacket and carefully slit the skin of my exposed forearm. I handed Luke the knife and pulled the crystal from my flesh.

Paige stepped forward with a handkerchief and I placed the crystal in the center of it. Then I took the knife back from Luke's hand. After a glance at the countess, Paige gave me another handkerchief and told me to wipe off my arm and the knife.

I healed the wound quickly, cleaned first my skin and then the blade, and handed the cloth back to Paige. I bent to return the knife to my boot and when I straightened, Paige was gone.

"It is good that you decided to return the crystal to me, Christina," the Countess said softly. "If you had kept it or tried to use it without knowing it's power, you may have been seriously injured."

"It was my pleasure, milady," I replied, bending slightly at the waist, "to return the gem to its proper owner."

"Where did you find my crystal?" she asked.

"Actually, Countess," I began hesitantly, "I had the crystal when we last met, but didn't know it." Her eyes grew dark and she looked at me intently.

"The man I've been searching for gave me the crystal and told me to swallow it, to keep it with me until we met again," I told her, fear of her anger making my voice tremble slightly. "He didn't tell me what it was or who it belonged to. With all the confusion and worry in the ensuing week, I'm afraid I didn't connect your crystal with the one I swallowed."

I met her eye again, confident that I was speaking the truth. "When Luke and I entered Lenin's square in Moscow, I became so ill he had to carry me away. I removed the crystal from my stomach knowing that as soon as I could I would return it to you, which I have."

The Countess' face had relaxed as I spoke and now she smiled at me. "Is there a boon I may grant you, Christina?" she asked. "You did not use the crystal for yourself nor did you try to 'sell' it back to me as another might have."

"I have only one need, milady," I said quietly, turning the ring slowly on my finger.



"Then ask, childe," she prompted, still smiling.

"With your great power I'm sure you know of a ritual that would locate the man I search for." I looked at Luke and he placed his hand in the small of my back reassuringly. "I ask you to perform this ritual and help me find this man."

The Countess glanced from my anxious face to Luke's calm visage. "I do know of such a ritual, my childe," she replied. "It is long and requires an object once owned by the person sought. Do you have something of his with you?"

My mind went blank. The only things I could think of were the rings on my fingers and the cross, but I couldn't bear to part with any of them.

Luke bent close to my ear and whispered, "The earring."

Relief swept over me as I realized I wore Jason's earring. I had been wearing it since we had left Paris. I reached up to remove it and handed it to the Countess. "It was his, milady. He wore it often."

She accepted the earring from me and held it up to the light, studying it. "Such a simple thing to ask for, Christina. You could gain large amounts of money from me, even great power within our clan. Are you sure that finding this man is all that you want?" She looked at Luke pointedly and said, "You seem to have a good man by your side already."

I looked up into Luke's eyes and saw that he understood. "I'm sure, milady," I told her. She nodded.

"It will take me until sunrise to complete the ritual," she said, rising. "If you wish, you may pass the night here, and the day as well."

"Our thanks, milady," I replied, "but we have information that Jason is in the San Francisco area and we have made arrangements to fly to the West Coast. With your help, we should be able to find him shortly after sundown tomorrow night."

"As you wish, my dear," she said, "But you should remember the old adage about a bird in the hand being worth far more than the one in the bush."

"Of course, milady," I replied.

"If I learn anything else, I'll be sure to let you know."

"Thank you, milady."

The Countess spoke quietly to Lena for a few moments, then allowed Brenda to kiss her hand. "Brenda Thompson," she murmured. "Would that be the same Brenda that Elvira speaks so highly of in Salem?"

"I have been assisting her in every possible way, Countess," Brenda replied.

"Yes, so I have heard." With a final word of farewell and a wink to Luke, the Countess swept from the room.

We returned to the car and forty minutes later were boarding the plane.

We awoke at dusk and quickly got ready for the night. I dressed more conservatively, knowing that the first thing we would do that evening would be to meet the prince. I still wore Jason's cross and the rings.

Brenda had 'spoken' to Antonio the night before and he had arranged for a car to meet us at the airport. I had refused to participate in the conversation, feeling too tired and heart sore to deal with either of them, let alone both of them together.

Shortly after sundown the Countess called and told me that the closest she could come to pinpointing Jason was that he was within a mile of the prince's home in San Francisco.

I recognized the driver of the car as a ghoul I had seen briefly in LA. He drove us to Julian's home, which was in one of the city's nicer neighborhoods. Before we reached the door of the house it opened and to my surprise Estrea stood in the doorway.

I hugged her tightly, wishing that she had been with us for the last few weeks, as I trusted her judgement completely. She saw Luke and hugged him as enthusiastically as she had hugged me.

"What are you doing here?" I asked her.

"I'm helping Julian," she replied. "What are you doing here?"

"Looking for 'Martín,'" I said. "Have you seen him?"

She shook her head and I introduced her to Brenda and Lena. Lena seemed to recognize Estrea's voice, and after a brief discussion, they realized they had spoken to each other when Luke, Estrea and I were in New York a few months before.

"Look," Estrea said, glancing at her watch, "I have to go." She pulled out business cards and began passing them around.

"Now is this a good number?" I asked. "I tried to call your old one...."

Estrea nodded, her expression sad for a moment. "I had to disappear for a while," she told me softly. Estrea had found out that her sire was involved with the Inquisition and had turned her back on him, allowing Michael to kill him. Her sire had been the Ventrue Primogen in LA until a few months ago.

When she handed Brenda one of her cards, she said, "Any childe of Antonio's is a friend of mine." Then she told us she hoped to see us later and walked toward the door.

A voice from behind us called out, "Be careful on the docks, Estrea. Watch out for the new guy." It was Cash, Julian's head of security and the Gangrel primogen of San Francisco. Estrea nodded to him and left.

Cash asked that Lena wait for us in the hall and led us into the conference room that Julian used for Kindred business. A glance around the room revealed that several of the city's primogen were present: Lilly, a Toreador, and Daedelus, a mildly deformed Nosferatu. Sasha, Julian's granddaughter, was also there. The Brujah had forcibly embraced her just a few months before in a ploy to test Julian's power.

Julian stood at the head of the large oval table. I walked over to him and bent to kiss his hand. "My prince, it is good to see you again," I said.

"It's good to have you back in San Francisco, Christina," he replied.

"This is Brenda Thompson, my sire Antonio's childe and my sister." I motioned her forward and she also bent to kiss his hand. "She is visiting with me from Salem, Massachusetts."

"My prince," she said, smiling.

"And you remember Luke Thomas from Los Angeles."

Luke stepped forward and bent over Julian's hand. When he straightened he quickly returned to my side.

"You are again visiting my fair city?" Julian asked me.

"Yes, my prince, we are looking for someone," I replied, tears threatening once again. "The mortal that I normally stay with when I am in town. He has gone into hiding and I—we need to find him."

"I am aware of the man's penchant for disguise," Julian replied, smiling. "However, I haven't seen him."

"He may not be mortal now," Brenda added, "and he does have a habit of changing his identity and appearance. We also believe that he may be self-destructive at this point."

"Have you seen any newly embraced Kindred in the city?" I inquired.

Julian shook his head, then turned to the others, but none of them had either. "What clan do you believe he may be?"

Luke explained about the Kindred from the warehouse in Moscow, but before he could state our suspicions about what clan we thought Jason was, Lilly interrupted him.

"Julian," she said, looking quite pointedly at Luke.

After a moment of their stares, Luke asked what the problem was.

"Where did you get that ring?" Lilly asked him harshly.

"From a dead guy in Moscow," he replied truthfully.

"We've had a mage group following us for the last month," I interjected. "We killed one in Moscow and Luke thought the ring might be used for a good cover at some point."

"It's a marker, a tracking device of a sort," Lilly told us. "It's probably how you were being followed. Give it to me."

Luke tried to pull the ring off, but it wouldn't come. Lilly walked to his side and, speaking a few words of Latin pulled the ring quite easily from his finger. As it came off, I noticed that its color changed briefly, then became quite dull.

"Interesting," I murmured. I hadn't realized that Lilly knew magic.

"Have it disposed of, Lilly," Julian told her, then turned back to us. "How long were you planning to stay in town?"

"Until we find him, my prince," I replied. "If we have your leave to do so."

Julian nodded slowly. "Do you have a place to stay?" When we said no, he gave us the name of a hotel.

"Make sure you are careful while you are in town," Julian added. "There is the possibility of a clan war brewing."

"Which clan?" I asked.

He smiled grimly. "The Brujah, who else?"

"If you get any information about Jason or a Kindred who could possibly be Jason, could we be informed?" Luke asked.

"Of course."

We thanked him and walked toward the door. I turned just before leaving and looked back into the room. I paused for a moment, noticing that Cash and Daedelus had already left the room using another exit. "My prince," I called softly.

Julian turned to look at me questioningly.

"I know that Jason doesn't want to see me," I said, my voice cracking slightly with my emotions, "but if you talk to him, could you please tell him that I don't care what clan he is?"

"I will, Christina," Julian replied with sympathy in his eyes.

I nodded my thanks and rejoined the others in the foyer. We got into the car and I was quiet as we drove away, watching the streets for any sign of Jason.

# REVELATIONS

Don't wanna go before I say what I have to say  
Don't ask me to walk away  
Stay the Night - 98°

As the limousine pulled around a corner, I saw a man walking down the street. From that distance he looked like Jason. "Stop!" I yelled, and before the car could roll to a stop, I was out and running across the street to grab the man by the arm. As I called Jason's name, I realized this man couldn't possibly be him.

The man jerked back and I apologized before turning away, stricken, crying as I walked back toward the limousine. Then I heard a voice nearby speak to me.

"You should look up, not all things are bad."

I looked around, but could see no one. The voice was deep, hoarse and somehow familiar to me. The words had definitely been spoken aloud.

I wiped at my tears. "You have no idea," I said softly. I knew I had to be losing it completely when I started talking to disembodied voices.

"You'd be surprised."

I stopped suddenly, realizing that it was Jason's voice I heard.

"What are you looking for?" he asked.

"You." I brushed my tears away and looked around for him. I didn't see him anywhere.

"Why are you crying?" he asked me almost gently.

From the corner of my eye, I saw that the limousine had pulled over and stopped, and that Luke was walking toward me. I held out a hand to him. "Stay back," I said firmly to Luke, then to Jason I asked, "Don't you know?"

"Someone told you to look for me," Jason said.

I chuckled softly, affection warming my voice as I replied; "Do you think I always do what someone tells me to?"

"If persuaded to in the right way," he told me. I still couldn't see him, but the voice was coming from directly in front of me.

"No one told me to look for you, I just needed to find you." His behavior confused me. Why was he being so cold?

"Well, you did, and now it's over," he said, his voice like ice.

My emotions began to overwhelm me, and I swayed on my feet, tears staining my cheeks. "It's over?" I demanded. "Do you have any idea what I went through looking for you?"

"You stole a car in Italy and were captured by werewolves. You were taken to Lena, and the two of you flew to Los Angeles where you helped stop a coup and picked up Luke." Jason's voice was calm as he recited quite accurately the remaining details of our search.

"You knew where we were and didn't bother to let us know you were alive?" How could he have done that to me, to us? My mind was swirling and I had difficulty realizing that I could actually see his dark figure standing before me.

"I'm not."

Lena stepped up beside me. "Don't you realize how much we love and care about you? We don't care what has happened," she told him.

A voice from behind us spoke up. "There are things he needs to take care of," Graves said firmly, "things he needs to do."

I began to walk toward the robed, hooded figure that was Jason. My eyes drank in what little detail I could see in the dim light. He raised a hand covered in a black leather glove and I stopped in surprise.

"I don't care what happened to you," I told him quietly, "I need to be with you." I took another step forward, but he backed away. I stopped, knowing that if he didn't want me close to him, there was nothing I could do about it.

Again, Graves spoke from behind me. "There are some things people need to take care of on their own."

Lena moved away from me, saying, "What is the big secret?"

I looked at Jason's upheld hand and saw that his fingers seemed too long in proportion to his palm. The sight confirmed my speculation of what clan he had been embraced into. "It was the Nosferatu, wasn't it?"

He didn't answer me.

"Do you think I care what you look like?" I demanded harshly.

Jason spoke so softly that I had to strain to hear him. "I do."

"I can't believe this bullshit," Luke exclaimed from somewhere behind me. "Christina has been through hell trying to find you and now you can barely bring yourself to talk to her."

"I think you need to let them deal with this, Luke," I heard Brenda say.

"It's bullshit! She deserves better than this," He growled loudly.

"This is their business, Luke, *family* business," she told him. "You need to stay out of it."

"Brenda, Luke," I heard Graves say, never taking my eyes from Jason's figure. "Shh."

"Jason, can't we just go somewhere and talk?" I pleaded.

"When I deal with this," he replied.

Graves passed me, walking toward Jason.

Lena, following Graves, asked, "It was the guy from the warehouse, wasn't it?"

When Jason didn't answer, Graves replied, "I don't know."

"We thought we killed them all at the warehouse, but apparently one of the Nosferatu got away," Lena told them, "and we hurt him in Nashville."

I looked at Jason but couldn't make out even a glimpse of his face because of the shadows thrown by the hooded robe. I took a small step forward hoping that he would allow my approach, but he matched my movement, keeping the same distance between us.

Graves put an arm around Jason's shoulders. "He'll get a hold of you."

"We're just supposed to wait?" Lena demanded.

"This is something Jason has to deal with by himself," Graves told her.

"Jason, please just let me get closer." My tears were still falling, dripping from my chin and staining the fabric of my jacket.

"I can't get closer myself," he told me sadly.

I looked down, unable to bear the agony in his voice. I wondered if his faith in God had survived his embrace. I knew that his relationship with God had been very important to Jason, but somehow I didn't think God would understand even a forcible embrace. Were vampires inherently evil? I had no

way to know, but I had never heard of God speaking to a Kindred, or even acknowledging our existence.

When I looked up, Jason and Graves were walking away.

"Stop!" I begged. They turned. "Jason, will you just do one thing for me?"

"What would that be?" he replied.

I pulled his ring off my finger and tore the fabric from the band. "Will you wear this?" I threw the ring to him.

As his hand lifted to catch it, the robe fell back and I saw that his arm was swollen and discolored, as if gangrene had taken hold and ravaged his body. With a shock, I realized that Jason still had both of his hands.

In the dim light, I watched Jason try to put the ring on over his glove, but it didn't fit. He put the ring in his pocket and turned away, waiting for Graves.

Lena stepped forward. "Talon, can I please just hug you?"

Jason moved back as Lena approached. She rested her head on Graves' chest, pointedly looking away from Jason. She put her arms around her Talon, but he only patted her back like one would pat a puppy.

Lena held a hand out toward Jason and I heard her say, "I'll be thinking of both of you."

My heart ached with longing as Jason stepped closer and reached out to brush his hand against the back of Lena's. She turned her hand to grasp his, but he moved away.

Lena looked up at Talon. "Please don't stay away so long, Mikael and I miss you."

Graves' face was disdainful as he said, "Next time I'll bring a dog treat."

She studied his face for a moment, searching. "Let us help, please."

He grabbed her shoulders and gently put her away from him. "Stop grasping at straws."

As they turned to go, I cried out in desperation. "Jason!"

He turned to look at me, and his eyes glowed briefly. He waited, not speaking.

"I love you," I whispered, crying, hoping against hope that I could reach some part of him that hadn't been changed by his embrace.

"You'll get over it."

My heart shattered and I collapsed to the sidewalk at his cold reply.

As Jason walked away, Lena called after him. "I know you didn't mean that!"

I buried my face in my hands and felt my cool tears wet my palms; I had finally found Jason and told him how I felt about him, and he'd rejected me.

I heard Lena talking to Graves, but didn't try to make out the words. A moment later, we all heard a loud thud from the direction Jason had gone. My head came up and I jumped to my feet, and rushed toward the sound, searching the darkness for movement.

Graves spun to look behind him as I passed, startled by the noise.

"Luke, don't be stupid," Brenda called, apparently able to speak once Graves' attention had been broken.

I rushed forward and saw Luke returning, a robed figure in his arms. I stopped when I looked into Luke's face and knew that he was on the edge of losing control. Luke dropped Jason at my feet and I fell to my knees, pulling him into my arms and brushing the hood away to look down at his face.

I gasped and for a paralyzing instant I thought the figure before me was the Nosferatu we had encountered twice before. By the time I recovered myself enough to realize it was indeed Jason, Graves had torn him from my arms. I tried desperately to hold on to Jason's hand, but the glove came off in my fingers. Clearly I saw his naked hand with gnarled and elongated fingers that were grossly discolored before he was gone.

I leapt to my feet and ran after them, quickly losing sight of both Graves and Luke, who had dashed after them. In the distance I heard a gunshot and tried to run faster. About three blocks up the street I saw a body lying in the road and that no one else was in sight. When I got closer, I saw that it was Luke, and that he had a bullet wound in his leg.

I knelt slowly beside him, unable to go on. I had no idea what direction Graves had taken and Jason had made it quite clear that he didn't want to be with me. I reached out and touched Luke's face as he lay unmoving on the pavement. His eyes opened and he gazed up at me.

"Are you okay?" I asked softly, Jason's glove still clutched in my other hand.

He looked in the direction that he'd been running. "I'll live."

Anguish washed over me. After all I'd done to find him, knowing now how I felt about him, Jason had walked away and left me with nothing. Slowly I laid my head down on Luke's chest and cried brokenly.

Luke's arms came up around me, holding me close. "Hey," he whispered against my hair, "calm down. I told you we'd find him. He's okay." His voice broke and I realized that Luke was crying too. "Man, this hasn't been my night," he added as he sat up and rocked me back and forth, his hands soothing my back.

I heard a car pull up and sensed that Lena and Brenda were both nearby. I buried my face in the crook of Luke's neck and held on for dear life. I felt the world slip away and reality leave me. I only knew that I was lost, and that my only anchor was the Kindred who held me to him gently.

After a few minutes of Luke holding and rocking me, I began to calm down. I sat up and looked down the street. Lena knelt beside me and I turned to her. She wiped at my tears with a handkerchief, her eyes dark and sad.

"If anyone can help Jason," she told me, "Talon can. He's the best. I feel the same way you do, Christina, but they won't let us help."

Luke ran his hand through my hair, easing it away from my face. His fingers passed behind my ear and he tripped the switch on the listening device I still wore.

Instantly, I heard a voice soft in my ear. It was Graves.

"—sure you know what you're doing."

Then I heard another voice and straightened, looking intently at Luke, who was gazing off down the street. Behind his ear I saw that his listening device was gone.

"Yeah," Jason said, "There's stuff I have to do."

Lena leaned closer to me. "What—"

I raised a hand quickly, intent on what I was hearing.

"I'll support you in whatever you think have to do, you were there for me when I needed you. But I have to agree with the guy; this is Bullshit."

"Look, it's something I have to deal with," Jason replied, his voice rough and deep. "I went through a lot of changes when I became your ghoul, this is just another step."

Graves chuckled. "It's one hell of a step."

"You're telling me," Jason replied sadly.

I heard a third voice, but couldn't recognize it. "Come on, its time."

I jerked my hand up to my ear at a loud scraping noise came from the device.

"That sly son-of-a-bitch," I heard Jason mutter just before an electronic click signaled that he'd disabled the other unit.

My eyes filled with tears and Luke gathered me back into his arms. "I tried," he whispered to me, his voice breaking. "I tried."

I heard Brenda speaking to Lena and a moment later I felt a touch on my arm.

"We really need to get off the street," Lena whispered. "Let's go back to the hotel."

I nodded and moved back from Luke. He tried to stand, and only then seemed to again realize he had been shot. I watched as the wound closed slowly and Luke stood, holding his hand out to me. I took it and he pulled me to my feet.

I swayed against him, dizzy and weak with grief, and he swung me up into his arms. I put my arms around his neck and he gathered me closer, tucking my head under his chin. I closed my eyes and felt him get into the limousine, still holding me. We rode that way, unmoving, to the hotel.

When we got out of the limousine, Luke stood me on the ground beside him and took my hand. He'd gotten a pair of sunglasses from the driver to hide his cat's eyes, and I couldn't read his face. He led me into the lobby and we stood close together while we waited for Lena and Brenda to check us into our suite.

I stood in silence and stared into space. I kept hearing Jason tell me that I would get over it, over him. I'd meant what I told Julian, Jason's clan didn't matter to me. I could look past his deformities and still love him, although Jason refused to see it.

I knew it was useless to hope that he would change his mind, but my heart tried to hold on to that hope like a flame in the darkness. Ruthlessly I forced myself to blow out that flame, knowing deep down that no matter what he said, Jason would never relent and we would never be together again.

Luke led me up to our suite like a child and took me into one of the bedrooms. He removed my jacket and pulled the covers back on the bed. He sat me on its edge and bent to take off my shoes. Then he gently laid me down and covered me lightly with the blanket.

As he walked to the door, I sat up and whispered his name. He came back and sat on the edge of the bed.

"What are you going to do now?" I asked him softly.

"I was just going to go and talk to Brenda and Lena," he replied.

"That's not what I meant," I told him.

Luke was silent for a moment and looked off into a corner of the room. "What do you want me to do?" he asked.

I looked down at my hands and the ring on my finger caught my eye. Tears began to fall from my eyes as I whispered, "I know it's not fair for me to ask this of you, Luke," I admitted quietly, "but I want you to stay with me. I need you to stay."

Luke reached out and put his hand over mine.

"I can't promise you anything, Luke," I told him, crying softly. "It's not fair for me to want you with me when I—"

"Shh," he said, pulling me into his arms. "You don't have to explain."



I cried while Luke held me, knowing he was my rock, my anchor, the only faith I had left in life. After a while he shifted on the bed until he was sitting against the headboard and I lay back on his chest. I fell asleep with his arms around me.

I stirred briefly, roused by the ringing of a telephone. The sound was cut off quickly, but I eased into wakefulness at the sound of Luke's voice.

I lay unmoving, not paying attention to his words until his voice became hard and cold. I enhanced my hearing until I could listen to both sides of the conversation.

"No, not right now," Luke said firmly.

"Then when?" the man on the other end asked.

"I don't know, maybe never."

"I need you to come back now." I recognized the voice as Michael's.

"I know what you need," Luke replied.

"If you don't come back to Los Angeles now," Michael told him, "don't ever come back."

Luke seemed unconcerned. "That's fine."

"You don't care?" Michael growled.

"No, I don't."

"Stay away from LA, Luke," Michael replied coldly. "I mean it."

"All right." Luke moved slightly and I heard a low beep as he disconnected from the caller. He sat the phone down and sighed deeply, then shifted a little to bring both of his arms around me.

"Luke?" I asked softly.

"Yeah, babe," he replied.

"Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, no problem." He tightened his arms slightly, leaning down to kiss the top of my head.

"If you have something you need to do, somewhere you need to be," I told him, turning my head to see his face, "you don't have to feel obligated to stay with me, I understand."

"Since I got no place to be, that's not an issue," he said with a note of finality in his teasing tone.

I looked up at him for a moment and wondered why he was lying to me. I knew Michael had demanded his return to LA and that Luke had effectively burned his bridges there.

"What about LA?" I urged. "Does the prince need you back?"

"The prince is gone. Michael is trying to keep everything together and he doesn't need me."

I sat up and pushed my hair off of my face. "Can we go home?" I asked him softly.

"Vegas?"

I nodded.

Luke smiled and held his hand out to me and I took it, secure in the knowledge that he, at least, wouldn't leave me.

# WHERE THE HEART IS

I don't know why you couldn't just stay with me  
You couldn't stand to be near me  
Push - Matchbox Twenty

A few hours later Luke and I flew with Lena and Brenda to Las Vegas. They didn't linger, choosing instead to fly to Boston where Brenda would retrieve her car and return to Salem. Lena continued on to New York for a Christmas visit with her friend Gill and his fiancée.

We all promised to keep in touch but I'm not sure I can keep that promise. My heart cries when I think about talking to anyone who knows of my failure to help Jason, and I'm not sure that talking to someone who cares as much as I do about Jason would be good for me right now.

As far as I know, no one has found the mage that took Jason in Italy. Jason released me from my vow to avenge him when he found me and then unmistakably and irrevocably dismissed me from his life.

Jason hasn't called or tried to send me any messages through our mutual friends. But I know that he's still watching over me when I turn to see a certain withered Nosferatu hiding in a corner full of shadows. In my heart I have no doubt that if I was ever in serious trouble, Jason would know and would come to me. He would save me without hesitation as he has so many times in the past.

I knew that Graves tried to keep his own tabs on me when I saw the young Gangrel girl who'd followed me in Nashville trailing my movements. I am ashamed to say that I used the girl to get a message to Graves. One night when Luke went prowling with his friends I invited that young Gangrel to sit at my table. We began talking, as women often do, about the men in our past.

The girl's name was Carolyn and I told her that I had loved a man dearly and had spent more than a month trying to find him after he had been abducted.

"Only it turns out that he'd escaped after the first few weeks and didn't bother to let me know," I said softly. "So, I think he's dead and two weeks later some huge son-of-a-bitch visits me in Nashville with a phone and my man's cross. I find out he's still alive, but he refused to see me.

"I end up finding him in San Francisco," I continued, watching her face closely. "That's kinda funny, since that's where you're from.

"Anyway, this guy that I've searched for comes up to me on the street but still won't let me get close to him. Then I finally manage to hold him, to see his face and the same big blond bastard comes over and takes him from my arms."

Carolyn's eyes had grown quite large by this time and it was clear that she knew exactly what I was talking about.

"Do you know what I would tell that big blond bastard if he were here right now?" I asked her. Wide eyed, she shook her head.

I leaned over the table to bring my face quite close to hers. "I'd say 'Graves, stop having your Gangrel bitch follow me around.'"

When I mentioned Graves' name, Carolyn's face showed shock and she drew back, but I kept talking, my voice low and dangerous. "'Graves,' I'd tell him, 'stay the fuck out of my life.'"

I leaned back in my chair and took a sip of my drink. Carolyn was gripping the table's edge, fear in her eyes. "Do you think you can tell him that for me, Carolyn?" I asked her calmly. She nodded with a jerky motion of her head and behind her, I saw Luke enter the bar.

Without another word I got up and walked over to him, sliding my arms around his waist as he smiled down at me and pulled me into a gentle hug. When I looked back to the table, the girl was gone. I heard she left the city before dawn.

One night a few weeks ago, I convinced Luke to go out without me. He went, although he was reluctant to leave me alone. After he left I pulled out Jason's suitcase and valise from the recesses of the hidden compartment in my bedroom. I laid everything out on my bed and stood for a while looking down at his belongings and the picture that was still by my bed.

I let myself remember all of the things that had happened to me since the night Jason burst into my hotel room in San Francisco. I had learned a lot about myself during those months, a lot about Jason and a lot about Luke.

After a while I reached out and took several items off of the bed, placing them in a small pile on the floor. I repacked Jason's things carefully and just before I closed the valise, I placed a short note on top that read simply "Thank You." I called an overnight delivery service and arranged for the luggage to be sent to Graves in LA. I had heard that Graves went to LA and has taken over as the prince. The Kindred in the City of Angels have reformed under his firm guidance. Apparently Antonio and Michael have decided to stay there a while longer.

I took the small pile I'd set aside and placed nearly all of it into the trunk at the foot of my bed. I studied each item as I stored it away: the pajamas I'd worn in Moscow; the box and the cell phone Graves had brought to me in Nashville. I cried a little when I picked up the glove I'd torn from Jason's hand, and smiled sadly as I put his picture away.

I picked up the cross and opened it. Ten of the beads on the inside danced with that strange cloud-like formation. I'd been secretly refilling them with my own vitae, one bead at a time. As I knelt by the trunk, I spoke quiet words of magic and another of the beads took on a cloudy haze. I closed the cross and placed it in the ornately carved sandalwood box I'd purchased to keep it in.

I held the ring Jason had given me in my hand for a long time, but couldn't quite bring myself to put it away. I had asked Jason to wear his ring for me, and it seemed cold for me to put mine away so quickly. I still keep it with me, either on a long chain that allows it to fall between my breasts, or in a small black bag I keep pinned near my heart.

I closed the lid on the trunk that night and did my best to get on with my life. I no longer talk of Jason or of the events that occurred during that horrible month we searched for him. I hoped that putting everything away would help me to forget him, but that hasn't happened. Still, I try not to remember the night we spoke in San Francisco, preferring to move on and follow Jason's advice. I'm doing my best to "get over it."

I believe that Jason is with Graves in LA, but no one has seen him. That really doesn't surprise me as he did warn me he would be disappearing. Do I still love him? Perhaps, but I don't hide from his memory anymore. Instead, I choose to look back on the good times we had with fondness, for my heart is healing and my world has moved on. I hardly ever ache for the sound of his voice or the touch of his hand in mine. I'd like to think that one day soon I will put away the ring he gave me and stop waiting for him to call.

If he did call, I'm not sure I could forgive him. I have my doubts that he'll even try. Jason's self-worth was thoroughly tied to his good looks and ability to blend into any situation and culture. I find it hard to believe that he'll ever recover from the shock of his embrace, especially if he had lost his connection to God. And even if he could, I live every night with the knowledge that Jason didn't trust my love enough to show me his true face or to think that my love could live through his embrace and the changes he went through.

It all comes down to the fact that Jason didn't trust me enough to believe that I could look at his face and still see his heart. I realize now that without trust there can be no love, so I think that perhaps he never truly loved me after all. On the other hand, relationships that are built on trust....

Our first night in Vegas I took Luke to see the prince, Felicia. She took one look at my face and at our clasped hands and agreed to let Luke stay as long as he wished. My respect for her increased at those words; I think perhaps my prince is one of the reasons Jason's embrace and appearance didn't disgust me as much as it could have, for Felicia is Nosferatu.

Luke stays on with me and sleeps on my couch, where Jason had slept so many times in the past. He is unfailingly kind and gentle, still not asking for more from me than I can give. As yet, there has been no repeat of the kiss we shared on the plane in Nashville. I know that the longer he stays with me, the more likely it is that something physical will happen between us. I can't forget the desire that raged through me when we kissed and I often wonder if the passion between Luke and I would be strong enough to burn away my love for Jason. Sometimes I think it would be worth a try.

As many as four nights a week, I go to the Tremere Chantry and study. On those nights, I wear demure black slacks and a jacket over a dark blouse, as I learned my lesson on the Tremere dress code at the Chantry in Detroit. I don't know what Luke does on the nights I spend studying, and I don't ask. I do know that he doesn't look in the trunk at the foot of my bed as I have placed wards against both vampires and ghouls upon it. I want no one looking at my memories but me.

On most nights, Luke and I go out to one of the casinos or clubs in town. Luke, being the outgoing person that he is, has made many friends among his clan here. On those evenings, it is difficult to tell I am Tremere as I have taken to dressing more casually. My usual costume is black jeans, knee high spiked boots and a low cut tank top under a large leather jacket. Those are the nights that I tuck the small black bag into my cleavage and pin it in place. If Luke has ever noticed that I still carry Jason's ring, he has never once mentioned it.

Of course I know that Luke doesn't give a damn about Jason. Everything he did, all of the pain that he went through, he did out of love for me. I can only bow my head in deference to his love, and hope that someday I'll come to feel some measure of that love for him in return.

By now it is quite clear that even if Luke drank twice more from me to complete the blood bond begun that terrifying night in Nashville, he wouldn't care more for me than he already does. In one way, I feel very good about that, in another it makes me quite sad.

Sometimes I watch him laughing with his friends, or feel his arms around me as we move together on the dance floor. I smell the natural Gangrel scent that is Luke and contemplate taking the third drink from him, knowing that then I would most certainly care as much for him as he does for me. But my mind rebels at the thought of completely losing my free will, so I refrain myself, striving to enjoy the time we have together for what it is.

Tonight I sit on the roof of my apartment building and watch as the desert sky begins to lighten with the coming dawn. Luke is here as he always is, watching over me while I type what has proved to be the catharsis of my soul.

Six months after seeing Jason's face and mourning the loss of his love, I am finding myself again. It's been hard, but I have to believe that eventually I'll... well, I'll get over it. I look out at the lights of Las Vegas and at last I feel hope: hope that I can pick up the remains of my life and allow someone else to fill the void that Jason left in my heart.

I turn to look at Luke and see that he is drawing in his sketchbook, as he often does. Before he sees me watching, I catch a glimpse of the drawing he is working on.

I smile at him, glad he is finally able to finish the sketch that he still doesn't realize I saw in Nashville. On the page before him, my eyes are clear, my brow untroubled. In the dawning light of a new day, at last there is a smile on my face.