



# CHRISTINA: JOURNEY TO RAMADAN

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# MY BROTHER

Do you remember anyone here?  
No, you don't remember anything at all  
Memories Can't Wait - Living Color

I was in New York, waiting for the plane my sister Brenda Thompson had arranged for my use. I waited impatiently, knowing that every minute of delay cooled the trail that I hoped would lead me to my friend, Lena Stockton. Mikael Provinof, Lena's fiancé, had called me in Las Vegas and begged me to come to Austria to help find her. I couldn't refuse, even though I was in trouble up to my ears with the Tremere Clan.

Elvira Van Dorn, the Tremere Prince of Salem, had ordered that I come to her city to break the blood bond I had with Luke Thomas, my lover. He was Gangrel, and the clan did not approve of the bond. They did not approve of any bonds that took loyalty away from my clan. I was damned lucky they hadn't decided to kill either Luke or me outright when they learned of the bond.

So now I had a week to get myself to Salem. I knew the only way I would make it was if I was able to find Lena within two nights of my arrival in Austria. I hoped I could find her that quickly, if not I would have the entire clan after me because I wouldn't leave the Holding until my friend was home and safe.

I had an hour and a half to wait for the plane, and I spent most of that time pacing the concourse. As my steps brought me in the direction of my gate, I saw a man about thirty feet away looking straight at me and calling out to someone named 'Tina.' I looked around to see who he was talking to, but I was the only woman nearby.

The man was dressed in a business suite and had a briefcase in his hand. He walked right up to me and said, "It's Carl. How are you? It's been a long time."

I shook my head warily. "I'm sorry," I told him, "I don't know you."

He was surprised. "I'm Carl, Robert's friend. Don't you remember me?"

Now I was really confused. "Robert?"

I thought of the silver ID bracelet I had worn for years on my wrist. It was the bracelet that had given me my name when I had woken in Las Vegas, alone and with no memories. I still hadn't remembered much of my life before I became a vampire, but I had been forced to break the bracelet in Moscow.

"Your brother?" Carl prompted.

I had no idea what he was talking about. "I don't know that I have a brother," I replied carefully.

"You *are* Christina Strong," he asked, studying my face. "Don't you remember me? I'm Carl Canali."

"I'm sorry," I explained, still confused, "I was in a serious accident seven years ago and developed complete amnesia."

"Oh, I'm so sorry," he said, touching my arm. "You don't know your past, then, or your family."

"I have met my father," I told him coolly, willing myself not to pull away from the light contact.

Carl seemed surprised. "Look, do you have some time to talk with me? I would like to be able to tell Robert that you are all right, and perhaps I can answer some questions that you might have."

I told him that I only had about half an hour until my plane took off, but that he was welcome to sit with me at the gate. He agreed and released my arm.

"You have an older brother," he informed me as we sat down. "Your father thinks he is dead, and that may be one of the reasons he didn't mention him to you. Robert checked in on you from time to time and he was very concerned seven years ago when you disappeared."

"Wait, Papa thinks my brother is dead?" This was all happening much too fast. "But he's not?"

"Yes," he replied. "Your father didn't approve of him. It went back to your mother, as well."

"What are you talking about?" I asked. I was really confused.

"I don't feel comfortable telling you all this," Carl said, not meeting my eyes. "Robert has abilities that your father thought were evil."

And until we were reunited two years ago, Papa had hunted those with special abilities. Hell, for all I knew, he still did. "Where does Robert live, Carl?" I asked. "Can you give me his phone number?"

"Yes." He pulled out one of his business cards and wrote a number on the back. "He's lived in Paris for years."

Paris was my next stopover. I wished that I had the time to look him up, but perhaps on my way back through. "How was he supposed to have died?"

Carl looked away for a moment, then said hesitantly, "Your father was involved."

"Papa?" I frowned, unwilling to believe the gentle man I'd spent time with could do that.

"Do you know about the Society that your father is involved in?" Carl asked.

I glanced at him. "Yes." Papa had been a member of the Society of Leopold, the modern incarnation of the Inquisition, for years.

Carl took a worn picture from his wallet and handed it to me. I looked down at a younger Carl and a dark haired man standing in downtown Helena. I had seen the other man before.

"I've dreamed about him," I whispered.

"What about?"

I closed my eyes and the dream I'd had the night before flashed across my mind. "The mountain," I breathed.

"What about the mountain?" he demanded quietly, his face pale.

"You were there," I said softly, watching his reaction. "Eagle's Peak"

His eyes grew big. "Yes."

I threw my head back and looked at the ceiling of the airport, fighting the memories. "That was real?"

"Yes. That's why your father wouldn't have mentioned Robert," Carl said. "I'm sure he didn't want you to remember what happened."

"Yes," I agreed thoughtfully. "Papa...." I whispered. I remembered it now, remembered the entire heartbreaking dream. Papa had brought others, hunters to the mountain to kill Robert, to strike him down even as years before Papa had struck—

Struck who?

The pain in my head was horrible, nearly overwhelming me. I rubbed my temples and fought to remain rational in spite of the headache and the memories that wrestled their way through the blackness of my past.

At that moment, I heard the boarding call for my plane and blinked away the memories. "I have to go, Carl," I told him, rising to my feet.

"I understand, Tina," he said as he stood beside me. "I'm glad I saw you. I will let Robert know you're alive, I know he'll be very happy to hear it."

Before I turned to go, I looked at Carl one last time. "Carl," I said softly.

"Yes?"

"We were friends, you said, in Helena?"

"Yes."

"How close were we?" I still had no idea if I had left someone other than my father behind when I was embraced.

He smiled, understanding what I was really asking. "I was your brother's friend, Tina. We trusted each other."

I nodded and returned his smile. "Thank you, Carl, for giving me back something of my past."

"You're welcome."

As I turned to go, I caught a glimpse of Carl pulling out a cellular phone and dialing a number. I boarded the private jet Brenda had arranged for me and waited until I had clearance after take off before I tried calling Robert. The line was busy and when I tried later I got no answer. I laid the seat back and tried to rest. I could feel the sun coming up in the east and the pull of sleep, but my eyes wouldn't stay closed.

The cabin echoed with the sound of jet engines in the darkness. Because of the airplane's construction, there was no danger of sunlight coming in to harm me. I knew I was safe, but still I felt vulnerable and alone. I couldn't get over the fact that I had a brother I couldn't remember. Seeing him in my dreams didn't seem the same to me.

A part of me wished that Luke had come with me. I knew he wouldn't have refused if I had called and asked him to. A bigger part was relieved he was still in Vegas, grateful I wouldn't have to pretend any longer that I might someday grow to love him. I had known for a long time that Jason Kline filled my heart; no other man could hope to take his place there as long as I still loved him.

Later, I tucked the blanket up under my chin and stared into the darkness, thinking about Lena and Jason. I prayed that Lena was safe and that I would find her quickly. I didn't know if I could survive another long fruitless search with a tragic ending. After a long time, I drifted off to sleep.

At the airport in Paris, I walked down the ramp and was so busy looking for Thalia that I was startled when a man spoke into my ear from behind me.

"Tina," he called softly.

I turned reflexively and pushed at the man, intending to throw him against a nearby wall. Instead, I got a good look at his face and the sight made my knees weak. He grabbed my wrist and spun me around, forcing my hand up high behind my back. I didn't fight him; instead I rose on my toes to relieve the pressure on my shoulder and struggled to get control of my emotions.

"Carl called me, Tina," my brother said calmly as he slowly let go of my wrist and stepped back.

I turned to look at him, leaning against the wall and nearly frozen in shock. "Robert," I breathed softly.

Thalia chose that moment to approach us. "Is everything okay?" she asked.

I glanced at her quickly, then caught my balance and looked back at my brother. "Yes," I told her. "This is an old friend of mine, and he startled me. Could you please give us just a moment?"

"I'll be right over there," she replied. She walked over to a bench and sat down to wait for me.

I stared at the man I had seen in my dreams, the boy my father refused to talk about, the child whose picture I had found hidden among my childhood treasures. He was as tall as I had remembered from my dreams, but a beard now hid the lower half of his face. He wore a trench coat over jeans and a flannel shirt. There was a small scar on his neck below his right ear.

A memory of us playing together as children flitted through my mind and was gone. I took a step closer to him and lifted a hand to touch his face. He smiled down at me with love and covered my hand with his.

"Robert?" I whispered.

"Yes," he assured me. "It's me, Tina. Carl told me he'd seen you, but he didn't say you were coming here. I'm glad we saw each other, but I don't have a lot of time. I've been contacted by a friend and I have to help find someone who's missing."

This sounded too much like my story to not be. "Do you know Lena or Mikael?" I asked as I dropped my hand.

Robert seemed surprised. "Lena," he replied. "Are you friends with Lena or Talon?"

Talon Graves again, I thought wryly, hating even the sound of his name. "Lena and I are good friends," I told him. I couldn't help but wonder how long Graves had known about my brother and not told either of us about the other.

Robert's eyes grew intense and he looked me over closely, then took half a step back. "Christina," he asked sadly, "what's happened to you?"

I studied his face, trying to gauge what he was thinking. "What are you talking about?" I suspected that he knew exactly what had happened to me, knew that I was a vampire.

He came closer and tried to touch my face, but I shied away from his hand. "You wouldn't remember, but you have nothing to fear from me," he whispered. "Not like your father. Does he know?"

"Yes."

"And you're still alive?" Robert seemed very surprised by that. "I thought my sins were bad, mom's too."

"What?" Had Papa killed our mother too?

Robert smiled and lifted his hand slightly. The heavy cross at my breast lifted a bit and I grabbed it before it could be obvious to any observers.

"You know what that means," he told me.

It meant that he was a mage, but I'd remembered that from my dreams. I raised my own hand and the tie of his trench coat lifted on its own, then fell back against his leg.

His smile widened. "Tremere," he said softly. "How long?"

"Seven years," I replied. "I don't remember anything before waking up in an alley in Las Vegas as I am now. When are you going to Austria?"

"With you," he told me. "I was sent to meet someone here tonight, it must be you. Unless you think someone else will be coming to Austria after you?"

"I doubt it," I said, then glanced at Thalia. "Look, I have certain... Traditions that I have to uphold, Robert."

"You need to visit Sabriel."

Sabriel was the Paris Prince; I wondered how much Robert knew about the Kindred. "Yes. Thalia is going to take me there."

"Would you mind if I put my things on the plane and waited for you there?" he asked. "I'm all ready to go, and I would like to get a little sleep if I could."

"Not at all," I told him. "Make yourself comfortable, I'll be back as soon as I can. The plane won't be ready to go until almost dawn." I hugged him, happy that we would have time to get to know each other. When I told him as much, he smiled.

"To re-know each other, sister," he replied. "I'm interested to find out what you've been up to the past few years."

I watched Robert board the plane, then joined Thalia. She told me that the prince didn't require a formal visit from me after all since I wouldn't be in town long and asked if there were someplace she could escort me to while I waited for the plane to be readied. I asked her if I might stretch my legs alone on the streets of Paris to clear my thoughts. She agreed and I thanked her for her help.

# CONFESSIONS

Forgive me father for I have sinned  
I've been through hell and back again  
Mine Alf Mine - Van Halen

I left the airport alone and walked the streets of Paris the way I'd walked them years ago when I'd heard that Jason was dead. I gave no attention to direction or surroundings, concentrating only on my memories. I was confused about my family; Robert was obviously familiar with Kindred, and Papa was a murderer. And how well did Robert know Graves? Would the bastard affect every area of my life?

Only slightly less painful than that situation was my feelings for Jason. It had been years since I'd drank from him, but even now I could taste his blood on my lips. I remembered his kiss the morning he was stolen from me in Italy, the last time he'd ever kissed me.

My love for him had burned strongly in the five months we had together and even stronger in the time we'd had apart. The nights I'd spent searching for him had been among the worst nights of my life. When he walked away from me in San Francisco, I'd completely fallen apart. If Luke hadn't been there to pull me back from the edge, I never would have survived.

I missed Luke with an intensity I hadn't expected. We had lived together for almost two years, and I was used to having him near me. I knew that a large part of what I felt was due to the blood bond, but that knowledge didn't make me miss him any less.

And what if I didn't make it to Salem in the time Elvira had allowed me? I hadn't called Brenda because I wasn't sure I wanted to hear that I didn't have an extension to my time limit. Lena was mortal, and I owed her for things I couldn't put a name to. Worry for her safety kept creeping in on my thoughts. Would I find her before something permanent happened to her? I had helped her heal her in the past when she'd been injured, but some things are impossible to heal.

As I had the last time I'd walked the streets of Paris, I eventually came to a stop in the shadows of Notre Dame. I looked again at its famous spires and stained glass windows and tried to gather the courage to enter the cathedral. I knew that God's peace was beyond me; he could be of no solace to me, tonight or ever. My embrace had taken me from the light of God's love and placed me on a dark path with no hope for salvation. I hoped only to find some sort of guidance within.

I looked up at the night sky and sighed, wondering if I would ever truly remember what it was like to feel God's love. With trepidation, I entered the church. I half expected lightning to strike when I walked through the doors, but it didn't. I glanced around the dimly lit interior and saw a statue of the Virgin Mary nearby. Her eyes were closed, but for just a moment I thought I saw them open and look at me with censure. I blinked and the illusion was gone. I shook my head; if I didn't get a hold of myself I'd run screaming from the cathedral.

I walked down one side of the church, looking at the mortals who had come to pray to their God. As I approached the confessionals, a priest entered one, preparing for confessions. I looked around to see that no one else was near. With great hesitation, I entered the confession booth. I knelt and crossed myself. Somehow I knew the words to speak.

"Forgive me father, for I have sinned," I whispered. "I don't know when my last confession was."

"Speak and be forgiven, my child," the priest replied with a heavy Parisian accent.

I took a deep breath to collect my thoughts.

"I have committed murder in self-defense and in retaliation for harm done against me. I have forgotten how to turn the other cheek." It was getting easier for me to kill, and I regretted the loss of my humanity.

"I have had sexual relations with a man who is not my husband, and impure thoughts about another man." Even in the confessional, I felt a rush of heat when I remembered the nights Luke and I had shared.

"I have been envious, father, of the relationships of others. I have watched my friend with the man that she loves and I have wanted that for myself." It had been hard knowing that Lena had the kind of love that I dreamed about when I felt so alone.

"I have stolen from others to make things easier for myself." When I was searching for Jason, I had done whatever I'd had to do to find him.

"I have been disrespectful to both my true father and the one I look upon as my father. I have not respected their wishes nor been completely honest with either of them." I hadn't contacted Papa for several months, and I had not told Antonio the whole truth about Luke.

"I have lied to my friends, my family, and myself," mostly about my feelings for Jason, and the bond with Luke.

"I have disobeyed my... family to fulfill a debt I owe to a friend.

"I have not kept the Sabbath Day holy within my heart.

"I have turned away from God in shame for what I have become.

"I have failed to keep faith with one who needed me. I couldn't help him, couldn't save him—" My voice broke and I had to force myself to go on. "Now he is beyond the reach of any aid and it is my fault." If only I had been able to find him in time, before the Nosferatu had embraced him.

"I beg absolution for my sins, father."

The priest was silent for what felt like a long time. Finally, he spoke. "Everything is possible, my child; love, trust in others, faith of life after death. However, I am concerned, that you hold your failure to help your friend as a greater sin than any of those you listed, greater than that of murder, greater even than turning away from God. Why is that, my child?"

"He counted on me, father," I replied sincerely. "God himself never needed me the way my friend needed me."

"You are wrong, daughter," he told me. "God needs every one of his children."

"Yes, father," I whispered. I knew I was right but I didn't argue, as there would have been no point. I couldn't tell the priest the whole truth about what I was and that was the only way he could possibly understand.

"Recite twenty Hail Mary's and fifteen Our Father's," he told me, "then perform one act of contrition. Go and sin no more, my child."

"Thank you, father," I replied.

"I expect to see you in the cathedral on Sunday, my child," he added.

I shook my head. "I won't be in Paris on Sunday, father," I told him.

"Then I expect you to attend mass somewhere else," he replied sternly.

"Yes, father," I said softly.

I rose and left the confessional, somehow feeling better than I had in some time. I stopped by the bank of candles on my way out. I lit candles for many people: Antonio, Brenda, Papa, Robert, Luke and Mikael. I lit one for Lena and one for Jason. Before I walked away, I lit one for my own soul, hoping that God would understand.

When I returned to the airport by taxi I found Robert reading a book and waiting for me. He took one look at my face and asked me if I were okay.

I tried to smile. "I just don't have happy memories of Paris, Robert," I told him.

"Come and sit down," he said, gesturing to the seat beside him. When I did, he asked if I wanted to talk about it.

"I'm not sure what to say," I admitted. "I don't really remember you."

"It is good to see you," he said. "I thought you were lost forever."

*Keep this on you at all times, Tina. It will help me find you if anything should ever happen,* I remembered Robert saying to me. I had a vision of him giving me the I.D. bracelet that bore my name; the one I had worn until I'd had to break it in Moscow.

"You said you don't remember anything before waking in Las Vegas?"

"Not very much," I told him. "Fragments, flashes of memories."

"Then you don't remember your embrace?"

I shook my head sadly. "I have no idea if this is something I chose or if someone forced it on me."

He smiled. "You always were pretty adventurous. It's something you probably would have taken the chance at. I remember Mama shooing you away from trees because you would climb them all. She bought you so many dolls, but all you wanted to do was tag after me."

I needed to know if he spoke the truth, so I gazed at his aura. He was happy, compassionate. I could tell that he remembered Mama and me with love. I took his warm hand in my cold one. "I'm sure that I'm quite different than the girl you knew."

"I don't think so," he said. "A lot of things have happened to me, but I'm still basically the same person you knew when we were children."

Because I couldn't remember, I had no choice but to take him at his word.

"Is there anyone special in your life, Tina?" he asked.

To my shame tears filled my eyes and I couldn't hold them back. I turned away, but not in time to hide them.

He put a hand on my shoulder. "I didn't mean to cause you pain, Christina," he said urgently.

"It's just Paris," I told him with a wry laugh and a shrug. "The City of Love." I fought back the tears and chose a subject that I knew would help me control them.

"How do you know Graves?" I really had to learn to keep the contempt from my voice when I said his name; everyone seemed to pick up on my animosity toward him.

"We had some adventures, years ago," he replied cautiously. "He saved my life a few times. You obviously don't like him. Why?"

Graves had known Robert when he'd sent Jason to help me in San Francisco. He'd never even told Robert that I was still alive, or that I was in danger. Anger at the Kindred rose hot within me as I thought about how different things might have turned out. Was it possible that Graves hadn't connected me to Robert? I didn't think so. It was just like the manipulative son-of-a-bitch to keep that kind of information to himself.

I drew a breath to rein in my anger. "He's too controlling."

He shrugged. "I didn't think so, but I guess Papa didn't seem controlling to everyone either." He proceeded to tell me that he had met Lena in Cairo when he and Graves had visited her there, apparently prior to Graves' embrace. We spoke a little of Lena, and agreed that she was a wonderful person. We both hoped to return her home safely.

"She's like a sister to me," I told him as I started to cry, this time in earnest. Robert held me until I could calm down, then asked if I knew anything about where we were going.

I told him what I knew about the Holding. Lena had been given control of it by Graves before he was embraced. It was almost like its own country and Lena held sway over the entire area. The Holding was a full day's ride from the nearest village, and accessible only by horseback and carriage.

"I believe Talon told me about it," Robert commented. "About ten years ago he said he was taking a priest there to recuperate. I don't remember his name, Jared, Jacob—"

"Jason," I said softly.

"Yes," Robert replied. "Is he still at the holding?"

I turned away before my brother could see the pain in my eyes. "No."

"What happened to him? He seemed a good looking young kid, very devoted."

I blinked to clear my vision of the tears that threatened to overflow. "Yes," I murmured, "he did have Faith. I haven't seen him in a long time."

"Talon was not forthcoming on the details of what happened to Lena," Robert said. "Could you fill me in?"

When I gave him what little information Mikael had told me, he seemed thoughtful.

"Does that ring any bells?" I asked.

He shook his head. "It might, but I don't want to say for sure until I can take a look at the area."

"I understand."

Robert glanced at my face. "You didn't answer me, Tina."

"About what?"

"Is there someone special in your life?"

I shrugged. "There used to be," I told him. "I lived with a guy for a while. We broke up when he realized that I... couldn't be serious with him. It's only been a few weeks."

"You miss him?"

"Yes," I said with a smile. "He was always there for me, no matter what I needed. He loved me."

"But you didn't love him."

"I did, in a way," I replied honestly. "But it would never have been what he needed, as much as we both wanted it to be."

We talked about my life and his until we landed in Austria at a small airstrip in the village. Mikael had sent the familiar coffin-like box to meet me, and I reluctantly got inside and fastened the top down. As I waited for dawn to come, I recited the verses the priest had assigned to me. Soon after, dawn came and I slept.

That day I dreamed of a woman reading to a much younger Robert and I from a worn children's book. Robert seemed impatient, but I was enthralled. The woman said something to Robert and he finally settled down. When I woke, I remembered everything I had dreamed and cried at the love and belonging I'd felt there on my mother's lap.

# THE HOLDING

So here we are alone again  
Didn't think it'd come to this  
Again - Janet Jackson

The next evening I woke as the carriage come to a stop and waited impatiently for the others to take the crudely made coffin inside the holding. I heard men's voices, and felt the box shift on the wagon bed. Within minutes I was being carried inside.

Someone tapped lightly on the lid of the crate and that was the only signal I needed. Quickly I unlatched the top and threw it back, taking a deep breath to drive away the closeness of the box. Mikael and Robert stood nearby.

Mikael looked worse than I'd ever seen him. His clothes were stained and wrinkled, and he looked as if he hadn't slept in days. He probably hadn't.

"Thank you for coming, Christina," he told me as he ran a hand through his already tousled hair. "I'm at my wit's end."

I knew he was completely worn out and asked when the last time he'd eaten was.

"Eaten?" he asked, shaking his head in confusion.

I took his arm and led him to the kitchen where Robert made something for the two of them to eat while I worked on getting any kind of information out of Mikael. It was useless.

Once Mikael started eating, he seemed to realize he was hungry. He wolfed down two large sandwiches and several glasses of milk, no pun intended. When he started talking about going out and searching again, I touched his cheek to get his attention.

"You're very tired," I told him. "You should sleep."

It was too easy; Mikael was too close to exhaustion. He laid his head down in his arms and slept. I lifted him and gestured for Robert to lead the way upstairs. He seemed amused that I could lift a full-grown man without straining. We put Mikael to bed in the room next to the one I knew to be Lena's, then went to her room to check things out.

Her room, like the rest of the holding, was neat and tidy, except that the bed had been slept in and not made up. A chain ran up one wall and across the ceiling to one of the beams, then hung down about a foot and ended abruptly. From my last visit there, I remembered that the chain had once held a light fixture.

The dresser was as Mikael had described to me, and there was an arced indentation in the floor. It looked like everything that had fallen into a sphere about seven feet in diameter had been literally cut from the room. Robert acted as if he'd seen something of the sort before, but refused to comment on it until he had further information. He found that information rather quickly when he inspected the closet.

"Shit," I heard him exclaim. I walked over to the closet and asked what was wrong. He held out two coins for my inspection. They appeared to be old coins, as the minting was irregular.

"What are these?" I asked him. "What country? What year?"

"I'm not sure what year," he told me, "but the countries are ones you wouldn't recognize."

I looked at him, puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"There is a world called Ramadan that exists separate from our own, Tina," he said softly. "These coins are from *Inferno* and *Bresilia*, two countries in that world."

"You think Lena went there?"

"I think she was taken there," he replied.

"How do we get her back?" I near demanded.

"I could send you to that world, but not go with you. I'll have to remain here to prepare the portal for your return." He glanced around the room a moment, thinking. "I will need certain supplies for the ritual, we'll probably have to wait for Mikael to wake up."

I smiled wryly, remembering his exhaustion. "That could be a while."

Robert nodded, then suppressed a yawn. "I'm not used to these hours or the travel," he said. "I need some sleep."

"Go ahead," I told him. "I'll check out a few more things before the sun comes up. When you and Mikael wake, prepare the ritual. I want to go to Ramadan as soon as I can tomorrow night."

He agreed and went off to get his rest.

I took one last look around Lena's room, then walked into the hallway. After checking out the other rooms on that floor, I remembered the tower room that held all the computer equipment. Thinking to find a clue to why Lena would have been taken to Ramadan, I climbed the spiral stairway.

I studied the touch pad on the wall by the door, but I didn't have the knowledge needed to break the code and found out rather quickly that my hand print wasn't registered in the security system to let me in through the palm reader. I headed back downstairs with the intention of taking a look around the main rooms. I was hoping to find any clues as to what Lena had been up to in the last few months or who might have wanted her out of the way.

Hearing the sound of a carriage, I went to a nearby window. In the courtyard was a wagon with several figures disembarking. I used the night vision that Luke had taught me, and suddenly I could see them quite clearly. The driver was an older man in ragged clothes that I recognized from the village.

I watched Nina Rodriguez and Cormac Brennan get down next, wondering why they had followed me to the Holding. Then I saw the final passenger. He looked like a young Talon Graves, but I knew his appearance was simply a façade. If I were blind I would know who he truly was despite the distance between us.

I let my vision return to normal and stood stunned for a moment. Jason was here! He was here and I could finally see him, finally talk to him! For a moment I forgot about his embrace and our separation and my only thought was about how good it would feel to be with him again.

My eagerness to see him slowly faded into pain and regret. I had long ago lost any hope of seeing him again and never expected him to come to the Holding. If I had known he was coming, I would have talked Robert into sending me to Ramadan as soon as we realized that Lena was there.

Turning away from the window I started downstairs to the foyer. I remembered to tuck the cross inside my shirt at the last moment for two reasons; so that it wouldn't upset Nina, and so that Jason wouldn't know that still I wore it. He had sent it to me two years ago, just before he walked out of my life.

By the time the group entered the building, I was leaning against the doorjamb of the living room, my arms crossed and one foot over the other. It was a stance that I had unconsciously picked up from Luke. Talon Graves filled my vision, but the man beneath the guise seemed genuinely surprised to see me.

"Christina," Cormac said, also confused at my presence. Before I'd left him and Nina in Vegas I had told them I was going to Austria, but not who I'd gone to find.

"Nina, Cormac," I said coldly while looking at Jason. "Long time no see." I kept a tight rein on my emotions, knowing that if I let them go I would totally lose control. For a moment I hated Jason for reminding me how important Graves was to him.

"Is everything all right?" Cormac asked, noting my attitude.

"It was," I replied without taking my eyes off the Kindred standing between Cormac and Nina. Nina glanced at him. "Do you know David?"

I gave a small smile. "I know Jason," I said, my voice like ice.

He met my cold gaze indifferently.

"I thought his name was David," she replied slowly.

"I know Jason," I repeated.

"I have gone by many different names," I heard Jason tell her as I turned and walked into the living room, unable to bear looking at him and not throwing myself into his arms.

I walked over to the writing desk and absently noticed several envelopes lying in the middle of the blotter. As I heard Nina and Cormac enter the room behind me, I realized that the top envelope was addressed to my apartment in Vegas. I reached out and picked it up, opening it slowly. I could feel Jason standing in the doorway behind me but I forced my attention to the paper in my hands.

Christina,  
I just wanted to drop a quick note to see how you are; it's been a while. Have you heard from Jason? I haven't, and I worry about him every day.  
I hope you can come and visit soon. I've had something developed especially for your visits. Think of it as your own private blood bank.  
Hope to see you soon,  
Lena

I folded the note and put it in my pocket, then looked up to see Nina and Cormac standing together by the fireplace. Of Jason there was no sign, but I'd felt him leave while I was reading the letter. Nina looked awed by the luxurious furnishings, and even Cormac seemed a little out of place.

"How long have you been with him?" I asked, my eyes on the desktop.

"Since we left LA," Cormac replied.

"You must have flown to LA right after I left in order to have caught up to me so quickly," I commented softly, my voice carefully neutral. The three of us had been assigned by an elder of our clan to investigate a Kindred murderer in Las Vegas. I'd left shortly after Cormac had killed the culprit.

"We did," he told me. "Antonio and Graves sent us to help find Lena."

I nodded thoughtfully. "Graves." My neutrality hadn't lasted long. I knew my voice showed my loathing, but I couldn't help it. Abruptly I turned and left the room without another word.

In the upstairs hallway, I was looking for an empty bedroom to sleep in when Jason came out of a door just ahead of me. It only took a heartbeat to realize that he looked like his old self again and that angered me. As much as I was glad not to see Graves when I looked at him, I wasn't sure I was

ready to see Jason as the mortal I remembered. How could he act as if we had never meant anything to each other? Like what we had once shared didn't matter anymore? Had never mattered?

He stood in the middle of the hall blocking my way. I looked him over from head to heel, a part of me drinking in his appearance. He was taller than me by several inches, and the breadth of his shoulders looked accented his narrow hips. His light brown hair fell over his forehead, making me want to reach up and brush it back. His hazel eyes were so deep I felt as if I could drown in them forever.

"Pretty," I said sarcastically, referring to his attractive façade.

"No," he replied quietly, almost sadly. "How have you been?"

"How've I been?" I repeated. I didn't understand how he could exchange pleasantries, as we hadn't spent the last two years apart. I wondered what he knew about my relationship with Luke. "Fine. Right as rain."

"Sometimes rain is not always right," he replied cryptically.

"It may not always be right," I told him, "but at least it's cleansing."

"Not if it's acid rain."

I shook my head. The last thing I wanted was to get into a war of words with him. "I prefer to have a better view of the world."

"Sometimes views change," he said sadly.

I remembered how abruptly his views had changed. "Obviously. Why are you here?"

"I'm here to find Lena," he told me. "She's missing."

"And that matters to you?" I demanded, genuinely surprised.

"Yes."

"She didn't matter to you in San Francisco," I reminded him roughly. At the time he had barely brought himself to touch the back of her hand.

He shrugged. "I was a different person then."

"I think you're here because Graves sent you," I told him.

"Graves didn't send me," he said, his voice still calm and even. "I was informed and asked to wait for Nina and Cormac to join me."

"You don't need to be here," I nearly growled. I was having a hard time controlling myself and fought to keep what little restraint I had left.

He gazed at me coolly, looking so much like the old Jason that it was hard for me not to burst into tears. "You don't know what will be needed."

"I don't need you," I bit out fiercely.

"I didn't come here for you," he replied smoothly. "I didn't even know you would be here."

I blinked around the pain his words caused and nodded. "You probably wouldn't have come if you had known."

"Yes, I would have," he assured me.

Talking to him as if we were strangers was too much for me. I shot him a look that would have made a lesser man flinch. "Stay out of my way, Jason," I told him firmly. "Just... stay out of my way." I turned and walked toward the nearest door.

"You need to get over it," Jason called down the hall.

Swallowing the tears that threatened to overwhelm me, I did the only thing I could do; I lied. "I have," I replied coldly without turning, then opened the nearest bedroom door.

"At least one of us has," I heard Jason whisper.

I spun, but he was gone, and there was no sign of him in the hall. I turned back to the room and slowly walked inside. I leaned against the wood for a moment, then turned the lock. I didn't know if I was hoping to keep Jason out of the room, or myself in.

I took the picture of him that I had brought with me out of my briefcase and sat it on the bedside stand. I dressed in the pajamas that had once been Jason's. I wrapped myself with memories of happier times with Jason and despite myself, I fell off to sleep wishing Luke were with me.

*My eyes were closed and I drifted silently, unwilling or unable to get a grip on reality. I felt the most intense passion I could ever remember feeling in my life. I opened my eyes and looked up at a canopy that arched over the bed I was laying on.*

*I turned my head slightly and saw a lace coverlet spread over the bed. Candles flickered dimly across the room. Some were in floor stands, but most of them were on the fireplace mantle and a nearby table.*

*A thin willowy man sat beside me on the bed. He held an ornately jeweled goblet to my lips and a cool liquid ran into my mouth. I gulped at it, and it burned a path down my throat. At once I felt both severely ill and extremely powerful.*

*I moaned loudly into the silence and curled into a ball. The man lifted my head into his lap and ran his hand in long strokes down my hair. He laughed softly as I began to weep.*

I woke crying blood tears the next evening, visions of my embrace dominating my thoughts. Had that really been me? Who was the thin Kindred who had given me his vitae? Had it really happened or was it some kind of nightmare that was brought on by the stress of Lena's disappearance and seeing Jason again? Then I remembered my dream of Robert and Eagle's Peak. Given the past accuracy of my dreams, I believed this one was to be more memory than illusion.

Taking a piece of paper from the writing desk, I spent several minutes writing down everything I remembered from the dream. Then I took a clean sheet of paper and sat quietly for a moment before writing a note to Antonio Moreno, my adopted sire. If I didn't return from Ramadan, I wanted him to watch over Robert and look into the details surrounding my embrace. I asked him to tell Jason that I'd always loved him, that no one had ever stood between us in my heart. I also wanted to make sure that Antonio knew how much I loved and respected him for adopting me as his child.

I put both pages in an envelope and addressed it to Antonio at the Las Vegas Chantry, knowing that Idella would forward it to him in LA. Then I took my time getting ready for the night, telling myself that I didn't know when I would have the opportunity to clean up, but deep down I knew that my efforts were for Jason.

# ARGUMENTS

Take back that sad word good-bye  
Bring back the joy to my life  
Un-Break My Heart - Toni Braxton

When I got downstairs, the writing desk had been cleared and now held various ceremonial items. Robert looked ready for a complicated ritual, and Mikael was talking quietly with the others.

The dream I'd had weighed heavy on my mind, and I felt the need for comfort from someone who wouldn't judge me for that need. The only one I thought I could trust to do that was my brother. I didn't really remember him, but from what I did remember and the things he had told me, Robert and I had been close once, very close. I avoided looking at Jason as I walked to Robert's side and put an arm around him. After a slight hesitation, he returned the embrace.

"When did you find each other?" Jason asked, apparently noting the family resemblance between us. "Recently?"

I leaned my head against Robert's shoulder and did my best to pretend that Jason wasn't there. Robert looked down at me questioningly, but I refused to explain.

Mikael spoke up. "I see a lot of animosity going on here," he growled. "I don't have time for this."

I looked at him with no expression on my face. "I'm over it," I told him firmly. I was getting a lot of practice at lying.

We heard a loud clatter and turned to see that Nina had dropped the small box she had been holding. She bent to pick it up, looking sheepish about dropping it in the first place.

"Nina, what's in the box?" Jason and I said in unison. We looked at each other in surprise.

"I don't know," she replied. I moved away from Robert to walk closer as she opened it, and saw that it was filled with marble sized balls. I recognized their cloud-like haze at once; it was the same as the crystals that lay inside the cross tucked beneath my shirt.

"Don't touch them," Jason ordered as she reached into the box.

"No," I agreed, "not until you need them."

"What are they?" she asked.

"It's like a blood bank," I explained. "I'd show you mine, but I know you'd freak." I knew quite well how Nina felt about crosses.

"So each one of these is like a blood bag?" she replied.

"Yes, except one of those could be like drinking four blood bags," Jason said.

I smiled, remembering the rush I'd felt in Nashville when I had used Graves' blood to heal Luke. "Yeah," I murmured softly, "that's true."

Mikael made a disgusted noise. "It slipped my mind until now," he said as if angry with himself. We turned to watch him open a small nearby trunk with a skeleton key. He lifted the top to reveal that the inside of the trunk was refrigerated and filled with blood bags.

"That must be what Lena had written me about," I murmured.

"When did she write you?" Nina asked.

I still had the note in my pocket so I pulled it out but it wasn't dated. When I said as much, I noticed that Jason was trying to study the note in my hands. I quickly put it back in my pocket.

"Do you mind?" I asked Mikael, gesturing toward the blood.

"Not at all," he replied. "There are goblets above the bar."

The four of us retrieved the goblets and filled them with blood. After years of feeding from both warm and cold blood, the cool temperature didn't bother me. From the corner of my eye I watched as Jason slowly sipped his glass, obviously not comfortable with feeding even after two years.

Robert pulled out the coins he had found the night before and filled the others in on their origins. He told us he could get us to Ramadan, but that he would be unable to accompany us. He handed the coins to Mikael who studied them for a moment, then gave them to me. I had already seen them, so I passed them rather quickly to Cormac, who immediately fell into a meditative stance.

While he was so occupied and the others were watching him, I turned to Jason. "It's a little different when you *have* to drink it," I commented on the blood he'd barely sipped at.

"Not the same rush," he agreed.

With a flush of heat I remembered the sensations I had experienced when I had fed from Luke in LA. "At least you don't have to worry about the blood bond this way," I said, driving the memories from my mind.

"The bond can be good," he told me.

I shrugged and finished off my glass. "Yeah, if you like living in someone else's pocket," I replied derisively.

He glanced at me, then said, "Actually, it can be nice to have someone know where you are at all times, to help you out when you're in trouble."

I looked away. "Does this mean you're revisiting old haunts?" I asked him.

He seemed puzzled.

"Have you reestablished the blood bond to Graves for the rush or for protection?" I clarified.

Jason gave me a disgruntled look. "There will always be a bond between Graves and me," he replied.

"Yeah," I scoffed. "Whatever."

For a moment, Jason's appearance seemed to shimmer and I caught a glimpse of his true face filled with anger. His beautiful hair was gone, and his earlobes nearly touched his shoulders. There was something... wrong about his face. I felt as if I had been hit between the eyes with a baseball bat. My mind was flooded with memories of his capture, and of the horrible weeks I'd spent searching for him. I turned and walked a few steps away, a hand over my eyes. I wiped at the tears that spilled from my eyes, mourning Jason's lost humanity.

"So," I heard him say behind me, "how 'bout those Nicks?"

I took a deep silent breath and cleaned the blood tears from my face.

"Robert," I said quietly without turning, "tell me more about Ramadan."

"If the dramatics ever die down," he replied wryly, "I'd be glad too."

I couldn't take it, not from Robert too; I had to leave the room. As I approached the doorway, I heard Jason call out.

"Christina, could you get my briefcase for me?"

I paused for just a moment and half turned, torn between wanting to beg for his forgiveness and wanting to kill him. I forced myself to keep moving and went up to the room I had slept in.

I changed quickly into leather pants, boots and jacket before throwing several changes of clothing into my computer case, leaving the computer itself on the bed. I didn't think it would be of much use to me in Ramadan anyway. As I was pulling the clothing from my suitcase, the metal picture frame holding Jason's photo fell to the bed.

I picked it up and stood looking down at the face I knew and loved so well. Not for the first time I wished things were different, that we had never gone to Italy and that he had never been taken from

me. Once again I searched for something I could have done differently, something I might have done that would have saved him. Once again I came up empty, as I had every other time I had studied my actions.

I sat on the edge of the bed and again tears filled my eyes. I wanted to call Luke, to ask him what I should do, but I knew that would have been the worst possible thing for me. I wanted my life back, and the only way I could get it back was to break free from Luke. I put Jason's picture in my briefcase along with my clothes and extra ammo, then went downstairs, passing Nina on her way up.

As I entered the living room, I overheard Jason asking questions of Robert regarding his equipment working in the other world.

"You think too much, Jason," I told him. "We go in, get Lena, and get out. Simple."

"Like you did for me?" he asked bluntly.

I stared at him blankly, unable to believe that I could endure so much pain without making a sound. I'd thought that Jason couldn't hurt me any more than he already had, but of course I'd been wrong.

"I'm sorry, Christina," he immediately apologized. "I didn't mean—"

I refused to look at him. "Lena might actually contact us to let us know she's alive," I replied coldly.

"I called you," he reminded me.

"A month later," I spat.

"I called you," he repeated angrily, "before I was shot, before I was dismembered, before—"

"Whatever," I all but growled, trying to ignore the horrifying images his words brought to my mind.

Abruptly Jason lost his guise completely and stood before me in his true form. I wasn't so shocked that second time, he actually didn't look as bad as he had the night I'd seen his face in San Francisco.

I simply looked at him expressionlessly. "At least you finally look like what you are inside," I told him coldly, striking out to hurt him the same way he'd hurt me.

He turned and left the room without changing his appearance or saying a word.

I sagged into the nearest chair and leaned my head back against the cushion. I closed my eyes and tried to find a quiet place in my soul to hide from my guilt as Robert chanted softly over the makeshift altar.

Mikael began pacing the room restlessly, soon joined by Cormac who sought to make conversation.

"I realize that I don't know you or Lady Stockton," Cormac said as he paced with Mikael, "but I do know what you are."

I nearly groaned; it was not a good idea to antagonize a shapeshifter this close to a full moon, let alone a werewolf who was stressed because his fiancée is missing.

"My brother and my nephew are also Garou," Cormac continued. "I have heard the term."

"I understand that you are curious," Mikael replied, "but now is not the time."

"I am simply trying to distract you from your worries," Cormac told him. "Would you mind if I asked what tribe you are?"

"I am a Child of Gaia," Mikael said softly as he paced.

They talked for a few minutes too softly for me to follow. I heard Nina come back into the room, and then I caught a fragment of Mikael's words.

"They are supposed to be her friends and they act like three year olds," he complained to Cormac.

I opened my eyes and stared at the pair in disbelief.

Cormac nodded. "I believe that is why we were sent with Jason. Nina and I don't know you or Lady Stockton, but we don't have the history, the distraction that those two have. And I too, tire of this," he replied.

I stood up angrily. "Okay," I bit out. "So we're the topic of everyone's conversation. Can we get on with it?"

I felt Jason enter the room behind me; felt is the only way I can describe it, I never heard a sound until he spoke.

"What did I miss?"

I shook my head. "Everything that could have meant anything," I murmured under my breath.

In the corner of the room, a ball of light began to sparkle in mid air. As we watched, it grew larger, until we could see through the sphere into another world. I bent slightly and picked up my briefcase.

"Mikael, do you mind if I take a few blood packs with me?" Jason asked.

"I don't know how long they will last," he replied, "but you are more than welcome to take what you think you will need."

"Better than drinking from the tap," Jason murmured, obviously not expecting anyone to hear him.

When he opened his briefcase to put the bags inside, I caught a glimpse of a worn photograph. I recognized it immediately; Jason had used it years ago to prove to my father that I wasn't dead. I'd smiled into the camera in a way that I couldn't remember smiling for nearly two years; Jason had snapped the photo himself.

The ball of light continued to grow until it was big enough for a person to walk through. I could see a meadow on the other side filled with beautiful flowers. Jason moved closer to it, but Robert stopped him before he could walk through.

My brother called me to his side and I went to him. He took my right hand and slipped a ring on the first finger. "You must wear this," he told me. "When you take it off, I will know you are ready to come back and I'll open the portal for you."

I studied the ring, then caught Jason looking at it too. I turned my hand so he could see it better. "Pretty, isn't it?" I asked. Then for the first time, I noticed that he still wore the man's wedding band that matched the ring between my breasts.

"If we lose the ring somehow," Jason asked Robert, "will we be able to come back?"

"Don't take the ring off until you're ready to return," Robert warned me again.

"But if it's stolen?" Jason insisted.

"Yeah, my hand might get cut off," I said sarcastically, referring to when his hand had been removed and delivered to Lena. The ring he now wore had still been on the third finger.

"I've had enough of this," Cormac said, and strode through the ball and into the meadow.

"If it is lost, there may be someone in Ramadan who could get you back here," Robert told us.

"Do you have an extra?" Jason asked.

I rolled my eyes and gestured toward the meadow where Cormac stood waiting. "You're not good at holding onto rings, Jason," I reminded him.

After a silent glance in my direction, he stepped into the other world, followed closely by Nina.

I sighed, knowing that I would have to change my behavior toward Jason; Mikael was right, we would be of little or no use to Lena as we were now.

"I have a favor to ask, Robert," I said as I handed him the envelope I had prepared earlier in my room. "If I don't return, will you see that this is delivered? It is of the utmost importance."

"Of course, Tina," he promised.

I moved to follow, but Robert touched my arm and I turned back to face him.

"One thing that I didn't mention," he told me. "There are no others of your kind in Ramadan."

I blinked. "Tremere or Kindred?"

"Kindred," he replied. "The very mythos does not exist in their world."

I nodded thoughtfully as I glanced at the others standing waiting for me in the meadow. "I'm glad I had this opportunity to get to know you again, brother," I whispered to Robert as I looked up at him. "I hope that we will have more time when I return."

He touched the side of my face gently. "I, too."

I turned and walked through the portal into another world.

# RAMADAN

I wonder can he see what a state I'm in  
Like a broken bridge  
Could've Gone Mad - Poe

The light was bright and I had raised a hand to shield my face before I realized that it didn't burn me. I looked at Jason and saw something akin to relief in his eyes. I wondered what he had been so worried about

I saw movement and turned to watch roughly ten unicorns encircle us. Some of them were coal black but most were pure white. "What did I miss?"

"The unicorns," Jason replied.

Nina pointed at the nearest one. "What's your name?" she asked.

The unicorn tossed its head and stepped closer to her.

"Well, Ever-Strident," Jason murmured, "are you friend or foe?"

Cormac stepped forward and bowed slightly. "Lord Ever-Strident, we have come to your land seeking a friend who was brought here against her will," he told the creature. "We wish to retrieve her and return to our own place."

In my mind I got an image that was reminiscent of a question mark and realized that these creatures were communicating with us. I projected an image of Lena back to them.

"She was brought here against her will," I repeated. "We'd like to bring her home."

I received a flash of recognition from the beings. "Have you seen her?" I asked. I waited for some type of reply, but didn't get one.

Nina surprised me by speaking up. "A couple of months? Wow."

"Months?" I asked. She'd only disappeared a few days ago.

"Months since what?" Jason demanded.

I shot him a haughty look. "Since they saw Lena," I told him coldly. "Who do you think we're here for?"

"Was she okay?" Nina asked the unicorns.

Again I didn't receive their reply and I looked at Nina questioningly.

"They say she looked tired and wasn't wearing a whole lot," she told me. "Was anyone with her when she got here?" Nina asked.

A picture of a man flashed through my mind: a tall, thin man with long, dark stringy hair and a beard that obscured most of his face. His eyes were wild and darker than midnight. I recognized the image instantly as it was the mage that had captured and wounded Jason at the monastery. Weeks later he had left a message on my machine telling me that my love was dead. I could almost hear his booming voice as he called for Jason to give him the crystal. Lena had seen the mage in one of her visions and dubbed him the 'crone.' I closed my eyes briefly, praying that Lena hadn't been harmed.

Anger rose inside me: I knew I should have hunted down and killed the man years ago. I muttered a sharp obscenity, which caused Nina and Cormac to look at me in surprise.

Jason's guise was completely gone so I assumed that he had also seen the vision. Strangely enough, the unicorns didn't seem to notice the difference in his appearance.

"Where did they go?" he demanded harshly.

I got the impression that the creatures didn't know. To them, the world consisted only of the Meadow, and of Outside.

"Who did you see?" Cormac asked.

"The crone," I bit out through clenched teeth.

"The crone?"

"He's a mage, I think," I said, then described him as I remembered him.

From the corner of my eye I saw Jason don the appearance of the mage and it startled me. By sheer reflex I reached for the gun at my back.

"He looked like this," Jason told Cormac.

I shot him a scathing look and let my hand fall. "Don't do that," I told him dryly.

He apologized and a second later looked like the old Jason again.

"Lord Chaos," Cormac murmured. "I received a vision of him when I held the coins."

Jason rubbed the back of his neck. "His image is burned in my mind."

"It ought to be," I mumbled, remembering the morning at the monastery and the blue flames that held Jason to the altar. His screams echoed through my mind and I raised a hand to rub my forehead.

The vision had finally shot home to me how much Jason's life had changed after the mage had taken him. How could I blame him for needing time to work things out? Perhaps he would have been more receptive to my aid if it hadn't looked like I was sleeping with Luke by the time Jason had finally called me in Nashville. Maybe he would have called me after I had returned to Vegas if I hadn't started sleeping with Luke in an effort to forget the man I loved.

Jason turned back to the unicorns. "Which direction did they leave the meadow in?"

After a few minutes when it was apparent that no one had received a reply, Jason looked at Cormac impatiently. "Can't you touch the ground and see where they went?"

I shook my head. "Jason, you're not helping." I heard galloping hoof beats and looked past Cormac's shoulder. "What's that?"

"What?" Jason asked.

"Sounds like hoof beats," Nina replied.

The others also looked toward the sound and we noticed an opening in the trees we hadn't seen before. A white unicorn entered the meadow followed closely by three ladies on horseback. The unicorn turned off to join the main herd, while the horses came directly toward us.

The blond woman in the lead seemed to be royalty as her clothing was markedly better than that of the other women. All wore serviceable dresses that looked to be floor length. The skirts appeared to be split for riding purposes.

They stopped the horses a bit away from the unicorns and dismounted. As they came closer, the unicorns parted to let them through. The blond woman was smiling in welcome, flanked by the other two.

"Greetings and welcome to Ramadan," she told us. "I am Countess Nimaway, and these are my ladies in waiting." She introduced the brunette as Amelia, and the red head as Grendel. "We will help you in whatever way we can."

Cormac nodded to the ladies and bowed to Nimaway as he said, "M'ladies, Countess. Do you have knowledge of why we are here?"

Nimaway looked confused. "Why, no, I have no mental reading abilities," she told him. "We have visitors from time to time and it is my duty and that of my husband to greet them. Our queen has decreed it."

"Annuauna," Cormac murmured softly, causing the three of us to look at him in surprise. Nina walked closer to his right side until she and Jason were flanking Cormac in much the way Nimaway's ladies were flanking her.

"Oh," Nimaway said, pleased. "You have visited us before. You do seem familiar to me, although I believe it has been some time since your last visit. How do you fare?"

"I am fine, Countess," he replied. "And yourself?"

"I am well," she told him. "Basha, my husband, is very busy, or he would have met you himself. Let us go to the house. I was overseeing the fields when the unicorn told me of your arrival, but I have sent word ahead to have refreshments waiting for you." At that moment, an open carriage entered the meadow.

"We thank you for your kindness," Cormac said politely, "but we are looking for a friend of ours who was brought here against her will. The man who we believe brought her here is known by several names; the crone, and Lord Chaos."

I walked closer to Jason and stood just behind his shoulder. I could see that Cormac's words had shaken him, and a part of me wanted to support him in any way I could. Despite what had happened in the past and our differences now, I did still love him.

"I'm sorry," Nimaway replied. "I don't recognize either of those names."

Jason glanced back at me. "Turn away," he said softly. When I did, he said to Nimaway, "He looks like this."

When the Countess gasped, I knew that Jason had changed his appearance to be that of the crone. By the time I turned back, he looked like my Jason again.

"You must have wonderful devices in your world that would allow you to do such a thing," Nimaway whispered in awe.

I laid my hand on Jason's shoulder and stood on tiptoe. "Did I mention that there aren't any of us here?" I breathed into his ear. I saw him stop an upward movement of his hand and ached inside; there had been a time when he would have covered my hand with his own without hesitation.

"Oh," he said softly.

"There are some in our world that have special powers," Cormac told Nimaway.

She gave him a small smile. "There are wizards in our world as well," she replied. She turned and escorted us to the carriage, where a driver sat holding the reins.

Jason held out his hand to help me in and I took it hesitantly without looking at his face. After he helped Nina in, he and Cormac climbed into the opposite seat.

"What is that ball?" Jason asked, gesturing to a sphere that hung in the sky.

"That is a weather control device," Nimaway replied as she mounted her horse. "Years ago we had a problem with our Ozone Layer, and our scientists developed this device. That is why there is no sunlight at high noon."

Nina seemed surprised to hear this. "You mean you live completely in artificial light?"

Nimaway nodded and started across the meadow. As the carriage followed, she said, "It controls the weather for us. We have ultraviolet lights for the fields so our crops can grow. It actually works quite well for us."

As she led us down a path through the trees, Nimaway told us that when we reached the house she would call her husband and inform him of our visit. She thought he might come home for the midday meal, but she wasn't sure if the queen would be done with him by then.

Nina spoke up. "Do you greet all of the visitors that enter your world, Countess?"

"Yes," Nimaway replied. "That is why Basha inherited the lands. It is my husband's duty as a member of the Royal family to welcome visitors to Ramadan."

I leaned forward and asked in a low voice, "Did anyone think to bring a picture of Lena?" I hadn't thought about doing so.

Jason pulled out a wallet-sized photo and handed it to me. I looked at it for a moment, then put it in my jacket breast pocket.

"Is the portal a natural phenomenon?" Jason asked the Countess.

"Yes," she replied. "It opens occasionally, and it has always been here."

"How often do you get visitors?" Nina inquired.

Nimaway shrugged. "Sporadically. The last visitor was five or six months ago."

"Who was it?" Nina replied. "If you don't mind my asking."

"Not at all," the Countess said with a smile. "Lord Malcolm was our last visitor."

I remembered the unicorns telling us that it had been months since they'd seen Lena. "Did he have a blond woman with him?"

"I don't know," she told me. "I only received accounts of his arrival, it was late at night and my husband and I were abed. Lord Malcolm had been here before and he knew where to go. He didn't wait to be greeted, but then he rarely does."

Nina's eyebrows shot up. "He's been here before?"

"Yes, he maintains a residence here," Nimaway said, "although I'm not sure where."

"I apologize for the number of questions we are asking," Jason stated.

"I understand," she replied. "I'm afraid I didn't ask your names when I introduced myself."

We each told the Countess our names as we passed into cleared land. There were many people working, and a few modern machines. Some appeared to be run by men or women walking along side of them.

The manor house stood before us, much larger than Lena's Holding. The area around the building was bustling with people as the carriage pulled to a stop before the front steps. Jason helped Nina and I down, and I had to force myself to let go of his hand.

Nimaway took us inside and seemed flattered when Nina told her that her house was beautiful. She led us into the sitting room while talking about her husband's family, and I got the distinct impression that she didn't like any of them.

A low table in the middle of a seating arrangement that had both chairs and couches held a variety of food and drink. When Nimaway offered it to us, I glanced at my friends, wondering if any of them could eat food. For the first time I realized that the blood hunger was strong within me, stronger than it should have been since I had filled up completely at the Holding.

She motioned for us to sit down. "Tell me about your friend," she suggested.

I suppressed the hunger I felt and took out the picture that Jason had given me. "This is Lena," I told her as I handed her the photograph.

"She's striking," the Countess breathed.

"Yes," I agreed, "but we believe that she was brought to your world against her will. Her mate is very concerned about her, and we would like to return her safely to him as quickly as possible."

Nimaway handed the photo back to me. "I have heard tales of such a woman at court," she replied. "I'm afraid I don't attend court as often as I used to, but perhaps my husband will know more."

At that moment, Grendel entered the room and bent to speak in Nimaway's ear. I tried to hear what she was saying, but I couldn't catch any of it.

When Grendel straightened, Nimaway looked at each of us in turn. "I regret to inform you that my husband will be unable to return to the manor until the evening meal. He extends the privilege of the grounds to all of you, and he will take you to Mopenos in the morning."

Cormac seemed confused. "Mopenos?"

Nimaway looked at him. "Yes, surely you remember?"

He shook his head. "I was in an accident a few years ago, Countess," he told her. "I'm afraid I don't remember anything before that time." I couldn't help but smile at the explanation of his memory loss; I had used the same many times in the last few years.

"I'm sorry," she replied sincerely. "Mopenos is the capital of the Ducal Division Perana."

"About Lord Malcolm," Jason interjected. "Is he a Lord here? Do you know where he is from?"

"Visitors to Ramadan are given great respect," Nimaway answered. "Each one gains the title of Lord or Lady, even as you have, Lord Jason."

There were several large photographs in the room, and now Jason asked about them. Nimaway told us that the most prominent among them was her husband's grandmother. There was a photo of Nimaway and her husband on their wedding day, and one of Duke Rama of Bresilia.

"Rama is engaged to a lovely young woman named Arial," Nimaway said coolly. "Her father is very wealthy."

I was wondering if there was anyone in this world that Nimaway liked when she asked us if we would like to retire to our rooms to rest for a few hours. I felt exhaustion hit me unexpectedly, it was almost as if the sun were going down and pulling me toward sleep.

Cormac thanked her and said that we would like the opportunity to compose ourselves. Nimaway told Grendel to show us to our suite, explaining that because she didn't know if any of us had mated, she had arranged to have a suite with four bedrooms readied for us. I shot a sidelong glance at Jason, but couldn't read his expression.

Grendel led us out into the hall where Amelia joined us and together they took us to our suite. It was lavishly appointed, and there were clothes for each of us in our rooms. Grendel gave me a quick explanation of how to dress in the elaborate clothing, and I thanked her before she left.

I was tired and hungry. I pulled the cross from beneath my shirt and touched the catch to open it. The beads inside swirled invitingly and I ran a finger across two of them. Instantly those beads cleared leaving twelve filled with my blood. My hunger eased, I sighed and closed the cross, grateful that I wouldn't have to use any more of my blood store so soon after arriving in Ramadan.

Going into the bathroom I cleaned the dust from my face and hands, then returned to the bedroom where I changed into the camisole that had been left on the bed. It was thin, sleeveless, and had a very low neckline. The hem fell midway down my thighs. It was a drastic change from the leather I'd been wearing, and it made me feel very feminine.

I folded my clothing and put it in the case I had kept with me, but I didn't remove either of my necklaces. I laid down on top of the blankets and within moments I was asleep.

# CONVERSATION

I think you're so mean, I think we should try  
I think I could need this in my life  
If You're Gone - Matchbox Twenty

I dreamed about the night that Jason had left me, but the events of that evening flowed and melted together, leaving me with an abbreviated version of that night.

*"You should look up, not all things are bad," Jason told me. "What are you looking for?"*

*"You." I brushed my tears away and looked up at him.*

*"Well, you found me, and now it's over," he said. His voice was like ice.*

*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.*

*"Do you think I care what you look like?" I asked him harshly.*

*Jason spoke so softly that I had to strain to hear him. "I do."*

*Graves put an arm around Jason's shoulders. "He'll get a hold of you."*

*I struggled to move but couldn't, frozen in place. When I calmed myself, Jason and Graves were walking away from me.*

*"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 threw it to him. "Will you wear this?"*

*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. He slid the ring into his pocket and turned away.*

*As he did so, 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 told him, weeping, hoping against hope that I could reach some part of him that hadn't been forever changed by his embrace.*

*"You'll get over it."*

*My heart shattered and I collapsed to my knees at his cold reply. I buried my face in my hands and felt my cool tears wet my palms; Jason was alive and I'd told him how I felt about him, but he'd rejected me completely.*

*I looked up into Luke's face and knew that he was on the edge of losing control. He dropped Jason to the ground before me and I pulled him onto my lap, brushing the hood away to look down at his grotesquely deformed face. A moment later, Graves tore 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 before he was gone.*

*I reached out and touched Luke's face as he lay unmoving on the pavement. His eyes opened and he gazed up at me. He sat up and pulled me into his arms. He rocked me back and forth, his hands soothing my back.*

*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.”*

*“Yeah,” Jason said his voice rough and deep, “There’s stuff I have to do. I went through a lot of changes when I became your ghoul, this is just another step.”*

*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.”*

The instant I woke I knew I was not alone. I didn’t have to open my eyes to know that Jason was in the room with me. Inwardly I groaned; I was lying on my back on top of the bed wearing only a thin camisole, and Jason was there watching me. I opened my eyes to see that he had pulled the chair from the corner of the room close to the bed.

“Did you want something?” I asked softly. Abruptly I remembered that the camisole I wore in no way hid the ring on its chain or the cross.

He held a blood bag out toward me. “You looked hungry earlier. I thought you could use something to eat.”

I looked at the bag and wondered how he could think about my needs after what my failure had cost him. Memory of the dream I’d just had overwhelmed me and I rolled away from him, clutching a pillow to try and hide the sound of the sobs I fought.

“I’m sorry, Christina,” Jason whispered. I heard him put the bag down on the bedside stand and turn to leave.

“No, don’t,” I said quickly, pulling myself together by sheer strength of will. I sat up still facing away from him and took a handkerchief from the other bed stand to clean the blood tears from my face. “It’s all right, Jason, you don’t have to go.”

I didn’t hear anything, but I knew he hadn’t left. I glanced over my shoulder to look at him. He seemed so different than he had been when he was my Jason, but so much of him was still the same. I drew a deep breath and said what I’d wanted to say to him since he had left me on the streets of San Francisco.

“Jason, I’m sorry, more sorry than I can say that I didn’t find you before....” I peeked over my shoulder, but his back was to me and I couldn’t see his face. “I can never make that up to you, and I think about it every night, feel it in every part of me. I know what happened was my fault, that I shouldn’t have let you go at the monastery, I shouldn’t have left you there. I....” My voice broke and I couldn’t go on.

I felt the bed move as he sat down on it. “Everything happens for a reason, Christina,” he told me. “It wasn’t your fault.”

I turned to look at him and nearly started crying again when I saw that he looked like his old self. “I feel like it was.”

He sighed and looked down in contemplation. “I never blamed you.”

“I did.” I held myself personally responsible for his embrace, knowing that I hadn’t saved him.

His eyes burned into mine. “Why?”

"Because I didn't find you." There had been many times in the past when I'd been in trouble and Jason had found me, saved me.

"Did you do everything you could?"

"I should have done more," I told him as I looked down at the pillow on my lap.

"Like what?"

I shrugged. "There must have been something." For the life of me, I just couldn't think of what it might have been.

"All you could have done would have getting yourself killed," he told me sadly. "That's something I wouldn't have been able to deal with."

As if he'd dealt so well with his embrace. I glanced at his face. "How are you dealing with this now?"

It was his turn to shrug. "Not too bad," he said. "We should find her soon."

"That's not what I meant," I replied.

"I know," he murmured sadly. "It's just hard for me to talk about it."

"Even with me?" I lowered my gaze, unable to look at him and know that he didn't trust me, had never trusted me enough to let me help him.

Another sigh ran through him. "I understand that what I did in San Francisco wasn't the right thing to do," he admitted reluctantly. "This had been hard for me to deal with."

"Wouldn't it have been easier if you'd had help?" I asked gently. I hated seeing him hurt like this, but at least we were talking without fighting. A part of me was elated to see emotion on his face, even if it wasn't love. In San Francisco, he'd been stone cold, emotionless.

"It's possible," he admitted, "but it's hard enough for one person to deal with this, let alone two. With Daedelus' help at least I can live a semi-normal life." He chuckled wryly and looked down. "I never thought I would walk into a bar to order a Bloody Mary and mean it."

Daedelus was the Nosferatu Primogen of San Francisco. I'd wondered if he was helping Jason, but I'd had no way to know for sure until now.

"So it was okay for Daedelus to help you but not me." I knew that sounded selfish and petty, but I had missed Jason so much. It hurt me to believe that he hadn't missed me at all.

"He's been through this," Jason reminded me. "You're Tremere, you've retained your beauty. Mine was drained like water into the sewer." His voice was bitter at the last.

I shifted to face him and looked into the hazel eyes of the man that I loved so much. "Do you really think this was ever about how you look?" I asked indignantly.

"Not to you," he replied.

"Then what's the deal?"

He took a breath as if to collect his thoughts. "Part of it was my appearance, and my ego," he explained, "but I was a priest. The embrace took me from God's right hand to the other side of the spectrum."

I nodded, understanding to a certain extent because his words echoed the thoughts I'd had in Paris. "I can empathize, but I just don't remember what it was like for me," I told him sadly. "This is all I've ever known."

"You've been blessed."

"Have I?" I asked cynically. "I don't feel blessed." My forgotten mortal life was like a black hole inside my soul. The more I learned about my past, the bigger that hole got. I had no idea what I was missing from my past and I longed to have the memories of those lost years back.

"Have you ever wondered what life would be like without eyes?" Jason asked me suddenly. "What it would be like without the ability to walk? To touch, to feel, or taste?"

"You can still do all of those things," I said softly. I didn't know where he was going with this, but something in his voice brought tears to my eyes.

"If you lost any of those things it would be difficult to deal with," he told me, looking off into a corner of the room. "It's the same as being out of His eye after so long. A part of me is gone, I had to reclaim that and understand what it is that I've become."

I understood every word he spoke because that was exactly what I'd gone through when he'd left me.

"It is true that I worked for them in the past," he continued, referring to the Kindred, "but at least I was still human."

"And I was the token Kindred girlfriend," I commented bitterly. "When you became Kindred, you didn't need me anymore."

He looked at me sharply. "I never wanted to be Kindred."

I returned his look, unable to hide the anguish in my eyes. "But you still didn't need me."

"You've never lost the feel of your heart beating," he said, shaking his head. "When that happens and you're around certain people without it, it's just the same as everything being ripped away. It's not that I didn't need you," he whispered. "I just didn't have the heart to ask."

"Were you afraid that I could still care for you after all that happened?" I asked softly.

"I hoped that you would," he told me, "but at that point I didn't care about myself. If you don't care about yourself, how can anyone else care for you?"

I smiled, knowing that the love I had for him showed clearly on my face for the first time. "I know that what I feel only comes along once in a lifetime," I told him, "and I won't let anyone make it wrong for me, not even you." I leaned closer to him, inhaling the scent that was still wholly his. "Don't walk away from this, Jason. I'm not afraid."

"As long as the lights are out," he said wryly.

I shook my head and frowned. "That doesn't matter," I replied, confused by his change of tactics.

"It does if it's sunlight," he returned.

His flippancy drove daggers of pain through my heart. For the second time I had told him exactly how I felt, and once again he was blowing me off. I sat back and bowed my head, returning to my study of the pillow. I was startled when his hand moved into my view. In his palm was the communication device Luke had slipped onto Jason in San Francisco.

"I believe this is yours," he said softly.

I took it with hesitation, remembering that awful night. "Actually, it was Luke's."

"He'll want it back then." Jason's voice had gotten quiet; I had to strain to hear him.

"Then you shouldn't be giving it to me," I told him with a sad smile. "I don't plan on seeing him any time soon."

He seemed surprised. "Isn't he staying with you?"

I winced, rolling the device between my fingertips and remembering the reason for my forced move to Salem. I was torn between anguish over missing Luke, shame that I still felt as I did for him, and apprehension for the clan punishment I would receive because of the blood bond.

"Not anymore," I replied at last, pushing away thoughts of what Elvira would do when I didn't get to Salem on time. If we could save Lena, I knew it would be worth my life.

"What happened?" Jason asked.

"We just knew it would never work out." I glanced up for a moment, but couldn't read his face.

He studied me closely. "We, or..."

"I think we both knew it," I told him with a sigh, unable to meet his gaze, "that's why he stopped being there and why I didn't try to make him come back."

"You still care about him," he stated.

He still knew me well, even after all this time. "It's not like I have a choice," I whispered.

"Everyone has a choice," he told me. "Sometimes we just don't make the right one."

I threw my head back and looked up at the ceiling in an effort to control my tears then shot him an angry glance. "I shouldn't have to explain to you how I feel about Luke," I replied heatedly. "You've felt that way about Graves for years."

"I still do," he said softly. "The man has pulled me out of a lot of difficult situations. Of course he's put me into some as well, but if not for him, I would never have met you."

"Luke did a lot for me as well," I told him, my voice regaining some calm. Luke had saved my very sanity more than once in the last two years.

"Yes, I know."

Did he? "He didn't have to help us try to find you," I said reprovngly, somehow feeling the need to defend Luke to Jason.

"I know," Jason said sadly. "He sacrificed a lot. He must have cared for you very much."

I looked down again and my hair hid my face from his eyes, remembering again the feel of Luke's teeth sinking into my flesh. "He does." I felt Jason's hand brush my hair back behind my ear and my eyes shot to his face.

"What else can I say except I'm sorry?" he asked me.

*You could tell me you love me.* I didn't say the words out loud, merely closed my eyes and brushed my cheek against his rough fingers. I was amazed that I could look at him and see the Jason I remembered, yet when I touched him, I felt what he truly was. The change in the texture of his skin didn't seem to matter; I had longed for his touch for so long that the abrasive contact actually felt good.

"Where do we go from here?" I asked. I was dissatisfied with his reply.

"Preferably to fill you up before you decide to feed from me," he said with a smile. Then he dropped his hand and seemed to consider his words. "Well, that might be a good thing."

I shook my head. "I am *so* not going there," I told him firmly, but inside I wanted it more than I would have believed possible. A full blood bond to Jason, or to anyone for that matter, would wipe away the partial one I had to Luke. I shuddered to think what the clan would do if I were completely blood bound to a Kindred from another clan. "I'm not hungry now anyway, I had something earlier."

He looked away, then reached up to remove something from his ear. When he held out his hand I saw the earring that I had noticed missing from my apartment lay in his palm.

"Here," he said quietly, "you probably want this back."

I could only stare for a minute, stunned. "Where did you get this?" I demanded as I took it from him. "Have you been spying on me?"

His looked toward the door of the suite as if listening to something. After a minute he turned back and met my eyes without flinching from my anger. "I didn't spy," he told me sadly. "You don't know how hard it is to see something you want so badly and know that it's out of your reach."

I looked down at the earring and thought about everything he had said. I knew that I still loved him, and that I would forgive him anything, even spying on Luke and me. I lifted my eyes to his.

"I'm not out of your reach now," I replied sincerely.

He slid from the bed and stood holding his hand out to me. I put my hand in his and he pulled me to my feet. "Let's go see who's here."

I was more disappointed than I could say that he didn't pull me into his arms. I glanced down at the camisole I wore, seeing the ring and the cross laying against the fabric. "I don't think I'm dressed for it," I reminded him.

His gaze set my soul on fire when he smiled. "I can't do *your* clothes yet," he said.

I couldn't help but smile back. "Give me a minute to change," I replied, "unless you want to help me dress?"

He glanced at the clothes that were still laid out at the foot of the bed. "I have no idea how that stuff goes on," he admitted. "I just...." he snapped his fingers and was Bruno again.

I shook my head; for all that had happened he still hadn't changed. "Give me a minute to change, then."

There was a knock on the bathroom door as he lifted my hand to his lips to kiss it lingeringly.

"I'll be waiting," he said, then turned and strode out the door.

I stood for a moment, my hand tingling where his rough lips had touched my skin, my head spinning with emotions.

# DINNER AND FAITH

If I could turn the day to night  
If I had faith to walk on water  
Take My Breath Away - 98°

The knock on the bathroom door came again, louder this time. I opened the door and looked at Nina with unseeing eyes.

Nina jerked back and gasped, making me jump. Belatedly I remembered the cross and apologized as I tucked it under the fabric of the camisole.

"It's okay," she said. "Is everything all right in here?"

I glanced at the door to the sitting room, but it was closed. "Everything's fine," I replied.

"One of the ladies came to tell us that Basha is home and dinner will be ready in a few minutes," she told me. "They are expecting us to come down."

I opened the door and invited her into my room. "Any idea how these things go on?" I asked, gesturing toward the clothes. Grendel had shown me how, but I wasn't sure I could dress by myself.

"I'll help you," Nina smiled. She stuck her head into the sitting room long enough to tell Cormac that we would only be a few minutes, then she helped me dress.

The neckline of the dress was too low for either of my necklaces. The cross I turned upside down and placed against my skin under the bodice. It dug into my skin, but I wanted the assurance that if blood were needed, it was readily available. If Nina hadn't been so sensitive to the cross, I would have worn it openly.

I took the ring from the necklace looked at it for a moment. Jason and I really hadn't resolved anything during our talk, but at least I thought we knew where each other stood. Jason knew I still loved him, and I knew he wasn't ready to return to what we once had.

Still, the discussion had left me with a choice: I could deny what I felt for him and spend the next century trying to forget him or I could acknowledge my feelings and draw strength from that remnant of my lost humanity regardless of what happened between us now. Slowly I put the ring back on my finger. It felt right, almost as if I'd never removed it.

"Nina," I said hesitantly, "do you mind if I ask you a personal question?"

She glanced at my face guardedly. "No, but I may not answer."

"Have you ever been in love?"

My question surprised her. "No," she told me. "I've been in lust, but not love."

I turned my back to her so she could fasten the back of the gown. "Have you ever been in lust for more than one guy at a time?"

"No."

I put a hand on the bedpost to steady myself, and Nina noticed the ring on my hand.

"That's a pretty ring," she said. "Where did you get it?"

I shook my head. "A good friend gave it to me a few years ago."

"So you're not married?"

"No."

Her fingers deftly completed the fasteners and she held the belt up for me. "I noticed that Jason wears a similar ring."

I glanced at her as I did the clasp on my belt. "Yes, he does."

"Have you had a chance to talk to him since we arrived at the Holding?" she asked.

I shrugged. "A couple of times, but they weren't very productive." I turned and sat on the bed to pull on the long stockings.

She sat down in the chair and studied me for a moment. "So, was he the love of your life?"

I shot a glance at her face, but saw only compassion there. "At one time I thought he might be."

"Did it end badly?"

"Yes," I replied as I reached for the second stocking, "shortly after his embrace."

"And where does Luke fit into all this?" she asked softly.

"You know that we've been living together for a few years," I reminded her.

"How is that working out for you?"

I wondered why she was so interested, but I knew she was Antonio's friend. Perhaps she was trying to understand why I hadn't contacted my sire in so long. "It's not."

"Why?"

I picked up the sturdy shoes from the floor and slipped one on. As I laced it up I tried to think of something to tell her that wouldn't be either an outright lie or the absolute truth. "Things aren't going as well as he would like them to. I haven't actually seen him for several weeks. Now that I'm moving to Salem, I won't see him for at least a year." I couldn't stop the tremor in my voice.

"You seem upset about moving to Salem," she commented. "Why? I hear the chantry is great."

"It's a long way away from Luke," I admitted as I put on the other shoe. I didn't mention the time limit I had to get there or the fact that I couldn't hope to make it in time.

Nina shook her head. "Didn't you just say that wasn't working out?"

I smiled. "It's complicated," I told her. "Kind of like that lust thing."

The ankle holster for my smaller Glock was on the bedside table and I buckled it into place. "I guess lust wouldn't be so bad if it was reciprocated," I murmured almost to myself.

"It's kind of frustrating when the lust isn't returned," she commented.

I glanced at her, pausing in the process of strapping my knife to my left thigh. "Actually, it's like pouring your heart out to a guy and having him first dump you, then not even acknowledge your confession." That was exactly what Jason had done.

I stood and put the larger Glock in one of the divided skirt's big pockets. "Shall we?"

She smiled. "We shall."

We went into the sitting room where the men waited for us. Grendel was apparently waiting for us in the hall.

"I forgot to tell you earlier that there are no Kindred here in Ramadan," I told the others before we joined her. "We have to be careful how we behave."

Jason nodded as I had told him earlier, but then asked, "How do you know there aren't any here?"

"Robert told me," I replied softly, thinking again how miraculous it was that I had found him, alive.

"Your brother," Cormac commented.

"Yes." There was no reason not to admit it.

"Let's go," Nina prompted. "They're waiting for us."

Grendel escorted us down to the dining room. A large table ran down the center of the room, long enough to sit thirty or so. At one end were eight place settings. Nimaway and a man I recognized as Basha stood near an older woman I took to be his grandmother.

Nimaway greeted us formally and introduced us to her husband. Basha presented his grandmother, Lady Ignitha, to us and he held his hand out to her with his palm down and she laid her hand over his. It was a gesture I hadn't seen outside of historical movies. He led his grandmother to a seat to the left of the head of the table.

Cormac leaned closer to me and whispered near my ear, "Stephen may be joining us."

I nodded. Jason looked at me expectantly, but I just shook my head. Cormac's relationship with Stephen was his own to explain, and he wasn't even sure the monk would join us.

When Basha returned for Nimaway, Jason offered me his hand in a more familiar manner with his palm up. I placed my hand in his, conscious that the ring he had given me would be quite obvious. He closed his hand over mine, his fingertips caressing the ring. He smiled down at me and led me to sit beside Nimaway.

"I apologize for not being able to come home for the midday meal," Basha told us. "My work kept me longer than I expected."

The servants entered and began spooning food onto our plates. When one tried to serve Jason, he held his hand over his plate. "No, thank you," he said politely.

Nimaway noticed his refusal. "Is there something wrong?"

"No, milady," he replied respectfully. "It is only that in my religion we have periods of fasting and for me now is one of those time periods."

"Oh, I'm so sorry," she said politely. "How long is this period of fasting?"

"That usually depends on how each individual believes he has behaved in the past year," Jason informed her. "I have three days of fasting left before I can partake of food again."

"Ah," Nimaway responded. I could tell that she didn't understand, but she was too gracious to question him further. "Is there anything else that I can get for you?"

I hid my smile from Nimaway with my hair and looked down at the table, knowing that blood was the only thing that would quench Jason's hunger. At that thought, I made a nonchalant gesture with my hand toward Jason, pretending to study my nails while baring my wrist to him.

Jason closed his hand on my wrist and casually lowered it beneath the table. "My thanks, milady," he replied, still holding my wrist, "but I have all that I need."

I suppressed a grin and remembered how much fun we used to have together. "I've missed you," I whispered affectionately, still looking at my plate.

"So your aim has not improved?" Jason asked me just as softly, amusement in his voice.

I looked up at him, confused by his words. Why did he turn aside every serious thing I said to him? Perhaps he really didn't feel the way I felt, he certainly had never told me he did.

A groan from Cormac where he sat across from Jason caught my attention. "Not at the table," he said quietly with a hand on his forehead.

Jason smiled. "Would you rather we return to the way we were before?" he asked, amused. He still held my hand, and I felt the coarse skin of his fingers caress my sensitive inner wrist.

"No, thank you," Nina said firmly.

Everyone began eating, but still Jason did not release me. I picked up a fork with my left hand and awkwardly began to eat. Even the small contact of my wrist in Jason's grasp was heaven for me, I wouldn't pull away from it for something so trivial as food.

"Tell me about the woman you seek," Basha prompted.

I laid down my fork to take Lena's picture from my pocket and handed it to Nimaway, who passed it to her husband. "This is she, milord," I told him.

He studied the picture for a moment. "I'm sorry," he said. "I haven't seen her at court."

Ignitha was discreetly trying to see the picture, and when Basha noticed, he handed it to her. After a moment, she said, "I have seen her, about six months ago."

Nina and I glanced at each other; this confirmed what the unicorns had told us.

I felt Jason's hand constrict on my wrist, his fingers biting into my flesh. "Jason," I whispered. He didn't respond, only gripped my wrist tighter. "Jason," I said louder, looking at him in concern.

Jason seemed to realize what he was doing and let go of my arm. "I'm sorry," he murmured softly.

I shook my hand beneath the table to check for damage, but it seemed okay. I turned back to Ignitha. "Did you see who she was with?"

She shook her head slowly. "I believe she was alone," she told us. "She was visiting Queen Annuanna, my niece. We spoke for a few moments. She asked me about the medical facilities here on Ramadan."

"Did she seem happy?" Jason asked. I heard a tremor in his voice and hoped that he wouldn't lose control of himself.

"She acted happy, but a woman sees things," she replied. "I sensed a deep sadness within her." Ignitha paused for a moment, then seemed to remember something else. "I believe she was introduced to me as the Lady Tracy."

"That makes sense," I barely heard Jason mumble.

I turned to him. "What makes sense?" I asked him softly.

He glanced at my face, then away. "I'll tell you later, Christina."

"I suppose it would be too much to think we could look her up in the telephone book," I murmured as I rubbed my bruised wrist.

"Actually," Nimaway told me, "you can look her up in the computer's central directory, but she may or may not be listed."

I looked at her with interest. "I would like to try that."

As Nimaway handed me back the photograph of Lena, Basha told us that he had instructions to bring us to court in the morning to be presented to the queen.

"We didn't think to bring a gift," Jason said to Cormac.

"Perhaps we can offer her our services instead," he replied.

"That will not be necessary," Basha told us. He explained that only the seven dukes, the queen and his own family knew of the visitors from our world to his. The queen would understand that we were not familiar with the customs of their world. Everyone else would be told that we were backwoods nobles from Bresilia. Basha and Nimaway would provide us with the appropriate clothing for our status that we would need for our travels.

Nimaway informed us that her ladies had asked that we allow them to act as our handmaidens for as long as we remained in Ramadan. "They are quite interested in other cultures," she said, amused.

Nina and I accepted the offer gratefully, although I suspected that Nimaway wanted them to spy on us as well.

"Countess," Cormac said to her, "I am expecting another to join us from our world. My nephew Stephen should be following us shortly."

"I will make certain that Ever-Strident is aware of that," Nimaway said.

We continued the meal with polite conversation. When we were finished, Basha rose.

"You have the freedom to move about the house and grounds," he said. "Nimaway will arrange for you to break your fast in your suite. Afterwards we will travel to Mopenos. We will do everything we can to help you find your friend," he promised.

Basha, Nimaway and Ignitha retired for the evening a few minutes later. Grendel led me to an alcove where I spent several minutes searching for Lena in the central directory. Some time later, I felt Jason entered the room.

He put his hands on the back of my chair and leaned over my shoulder to look at the computer screen. "Any luck?" he asked.

"None," I replied, distracted by his nearness. "I can't find any reference to a Lady Tracy or a Lady Lena Stockton."

"Were you aware that Tracy was the name of Graves' domitor before his embrace?" he asked.

I looked up at him speculatively, then turned back to the keyboard and did a search for Lady Graves. A moment later the screen flashed with the message "Person not found."

"This is a dead end," I said in disgust.

"Perhaps we should retire," Jason suggested. "Things may be a little clearer in the morning."

He moved away from my seat and I stood, turning to face him.

"I just don't want to be too late for her," I told him sadly.

Jason refused to meet my gaze and gestured for me to exit the room before him. We returned to our suite in silence, each of us thinking about the consequence of a rescue that came too late, or not at all.

I excused myself and went to my bedroom without waiting for Jason to respond. I locked the door and leaned against it for several minutes, listening to Jason moving around the sitting room. I closed my eyes and wished that I didn't still feel the guilt clogging my soul, that I could go to him and hold him the way that I had once been able to. But his embrace and my relationship with Luke weighed heavy on my mind, and I forced myself to step away from the door.

After I took a brief shower and purged the food I'd eaten from my system, I sat on the bed with my computer case opened before me. I took out the picture of Jason and looked down at it, remembering happier times with him. I longed for those days the way I longed for my memories to return and free me from the dark land of forgetfulness.

I sat the frame down and spun the ring on my finger. Through my window I could see that night was falling. I closed the case and sat it on the floor by the bed, then turned and picked Jason's picture back up. The bed had been turned down, and I crawled beneath the covers, still holding the frame. I wondered idly what the sunset would have looked like in this world. I closed my eyes remembering seeing the sunrise I had seen the morning I had lost Jason.

I fell asleep clutching his picture to my chest. It made me feel closer to him somehow, as if he were in the room with me, watching over me as I slept.

*"Christina! Come down here!" I heard my father yell from his study. It's the tone he only used when he's really upset with me.*

*"I'm coming papa," I called back in my best 'daddy's little girl' voice while running through a list in my head trying to figure out what I did wrong. I was happy to still wearing my school clothes. Although he didn't like the clothes I wore, he hated the clothes I wanted to wear.*

*When I entered the study, I could see the anger written on his face but he motioned for me to sit down instead of yelling right away. The reprieve didn't last long.*

*"What did I tell you about socializing with lowlifes?" he asked with a sour look on his face. When I opened my mouth to answer he continued.*

*"I just got off the phone with Mrs. Lansky, and she said she saw you on the back of a motorcycle last night. With that Thorpe kid. You told me you were going to your friend Jane's." This time I interrupted him.*

*"I did go to Jane's! Marcus is a friend of Billy, her boyfriend. We were going to get some pop and chips. Papa—"*

*He raised a hand to stop me. "Save it young lady. If Jane wants to waste her life that's between her and her parents, but you are my responsibility. Your brother died because he was hanging out with scum and got mixed up with something he couldn't handle. Do you want the same to happen to you?"*

*Although it had been some years since my brother's death, it still hurt when I thought about it. To hear Papa use it as a scare tactic only made it that much worse. I couldn't help the tears that came to my eyes.*

*"I'm sorry," I managed to whisper, though I didn't really know why I'd apologized. I'd only gone to get pop and chips after all. Marcus was a nice boy, really. He'd been in one of my classes the year before so I kind of knew him.*

*"It's okay, this time. Just don't let me catch you hanging out with that type again. And if Jane wants to go with them, well then you just come right home. You don't need her type as a friend anyway," he said with a serious look on his face. "Now get back to your homework."*

*I hurried back to my room and closed the door quietly. I still didn't understand what Papa had against my friends, we were all on the honor roll at school and had never been in any kind of trouble with the law.*

*Okay, so Billy and Marcus had motorcycles and wore their leather jackets to class, but they did look good in them. And Marcus had asked if he could see me again. Tonight. If I could just figure out how to get past Papa.*

# DEPARTURES

I just stand by and watch you  
Fight your secret war  
Joey - Concrete Blonde

Grendel woke me the next morning with a light tap on my door. I quickly put Jason's picture in my computer case and let her in. She assisted me in dressing, then helped me pack for our journey. She told me that breakfast was waiting in the sitting room before leaving the suite with Amelia.

When Nina had joined me we transferred portions of the food to our plates and disposed of it in the bathroom, saving ourselves another purging. The men joined us, and we together waited in anxious silence for Basha to send word that he was ready, or for Stephen to join us, whichever came first.

Jason stood by the large window leaning against its frame. He had changed his appearance again, becoming a little taller with his hair waving softly past his shoulders. I sat sideways on one of the couches with my legs pulled up and watched him broodingly. I opened myself to his aura and watched the colors swirl and flicker, reading his emotions one by one.

The first two things I saw were his confusion and the fact that he was daydreaming. He seemed happy to see the brightness of the day, but envious of those who were outside working in it. Underlying everything was a depression I had never before seen in his aura, but then this was the first time I had read his aura since his embrace. Every once in a while I saw fear shoot through him, and I wondered if he thought of Lena.

There was a knock at the door and Cormac called for the person to enter. A maid opened the door and stepped in. "My lords, ladies," she announced, "Your friend Lord Stephen has arrived."

I turned to face the door as she stepped aside for Stephen Brennan to come into the room. He was dressed all in black with a priest's collar that showed up prominently against his dark clothing. He had a knapsack on his back and held a black fedora and a walking stick in his hands. His large cross fell to the middle of his chest. He placed his things against a desk in the corner and I turned back to watch Jason.

Cormac rose to greet his nephew, but Jason didn't seem to notice that we had a visitor.

"It is good to see you," Cormac told Stephen.

"It is good to see you as well," he replied, his voice sounding a bit confused. "I am surprised to see you in this circumstance."

"The daylight," Cormac murmured. He explained about the atmospheric problems that Ramadan had been through and that their corrective measures allowed us to move about during the day when we should have been unconscious. "However, there are none of our kind here, so we must take care in what we reveal."

"Do you know if there are any of my kind here?" Stephen inquired.

"I haven't heard," Cormac replied.

"Who is your friend?"

"That is Jason Kline," Cormac told him.

At hearing his name, Jason turned.

"I thought you said he was Nosferatu," Stephen commented softly.

"He is using one of their abilities to hide his appearance," Cormac explained.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Stephen move behind the couch toward Jason. After a slight hesitation, Jason walked forward to meet him half way near the other end of the couch that I sat on. As they shook hands, Stephen introduced himself.

"How are you? I am Brother Stephen."

I watched as Jason's hand began to shake in Stephen's grasp. For a moment I thought that the werewolf was hurting him, then I realized that shock and loss was plainly written on Jason's face. His aura pulsed with bitterness, confusion, and fear, while envy and sadness warred with a remembered spiritualism. My heart ached for the pain he was going through.

"Are you all right?" Stephen asked in concern. His aura showed his concern, along with his interest and curiosity at Jason's reaction to him. The colors were bright and vibrant, and had a shine to them that I remembered from Jason's mortal days.

At that moment, Nina gasped loudly and held a pillow to her face. I looked in her direction in time to see her get up from the other couch and dash toward her bedroom.

"Nina," I called, "are you okay?"

"I'll get back to you," she replied as she left the room and slammed the door shut.

I looked back at Stephen with narrowed eyes, trying to figure out exactly what he had done to provoke such a reaction from Nina. Neither he nor Jason had noticed Nina's departure.

"Where did you study?" Jason asked in an almost too casual voice.

"In Ireland at the Abby of the Church of St. Gabriel," Stephen replied.

Cormac stood and silently followed Nina out of the room. I watched Jason with my peripheral vision, aching for his pain while he spoke with Stephen.

"My studies were at a remote monastery in Italy," Jason told him.

"You are associated with the Church?" Stephen asked.

Jason glanced away. "I used to be."

"I'm sorry," the werewolf replied. "You were a member of the clergy before you were embraced?"

Jason nodded, obviously in better control of himself.

"Have you been inside of a church since then?"

"No," he replied curtly with a brief shake of his head. "I don't understand why He would allow this tragedy to happen."

I didn't understand it either, but then I didn't remember what God had meant to me. I knew the loss of his faith had hit Jason very hard, almost too hard for him to handle, but I'd never heard him speak of it like this before, with despair coloring every word he spoke.

"We are all creatures of the Almighty, despite the trials he places before us," Stephen reminded him. "We must continue to do his work."

"I continue to try," Jason said sadly.

"That is the best that we are ever able to do," Stephen rationalized. "Perhaps we could continue this conversation at a later time, I would like the opportunity to bring you back into the fold."

"If it is possible," Jason told him. "But I don't believe it will be. I don't understand why he would turn away from me, it is not as if I chose this existence."

I felt tears well up in my eyes and swung my feet off the couch, turning my back to the men. I didn't want them to see me cry. I reached for a napkin from the low table and dabbed surreptitiously at my eyes while Jason continued speaking, his voice tight and painful.

"I used to feel Him near me, hear Him speak to me, but in the last two years I have heard nothing from Him. I know that sometimes we have to be quiet to hear him, to understand, but there

is no message coming in. I have even looked to metaphors for possible answers, as I know His message comes in many different forms, but I have found nothing. Only one of my prayers have been answered, but..."

His voice broke and he took a deep breath to control his emotions. "We need to find Lena."

"Yes," Stephen replied, "back to the business at hand."

"May I ask what you are doing here?"

"Cormac is my uncle," Stephen stated.

"What is the age difference between you?"

"I was a young lad of five when my uncle disappeared."

Jason nodded. "I know it is hard when you miss someone that you care about."

I closed my eyes against the pain that washed over me at his words. Even with Luke to watch over me, the last two years without Jason had been hell for me. I kept thinking that I could have prevented his loss if only I had found him in time. I had to get out of that room; I had to get away from the pain Jason's bared emotions were causing me. I stood slowly.

"After his disappearance, I was apprenticed to a monastery for study. It was an order of Benedictine monks, and I eventually became a lay brother, then was ordained. Just recently my father, his brother, passed away and I began searching for Cormac. It was a difficult time, but at least my father died in the service of the Lord."

As the men were near my bedroom door and I didn't want them to see how upset I was, I couldn't retreat to my room. I hesitated, trying to figure out where I could escape to, knowing I had to leave before I burst into tears.

"Natural causes I hope."

"I'm afraid not," Stephen replied, but didn't explain. "So I began my search and actually we were only reunited a few days ago. I am having some difficulty reconciling myself to his current condition. You may have heard that he has amnesia, he doesn't remember me at all."

I strode to the door of Jason's room and entered it, quietly closing the door behind me. I stood in the center of the room closed my eyes, inhaling the lingering aroma that was Jason's. It was slightly different from what I remembered, of course. Where years ago he had smelled faintly of Gangrel blood, now the odor of the Nosferatu blended with the scent I knew to be his. I swayed with the force of the memories it brought back.

I remembered dancing with him in San Francisco, the lights of the city spread out before us like a blanket. I had been so happy then; there had been no warning of the tragedy that would strike our future. It took little effort for me to recall the taste of his blood from the times I had drank from him. I knew his vitae would be different now, and that if I drank from him it would begin a blood bond, but still I ached to taste him again.

I walked to the bed and looked down at the computer case sitting open on its surface. I ran my hand lightly down the computer screen built into the lid and stroked the keyboard his fingers had touched. Again it hit me how some things about him hadn't changed; to one side of the case were detonation fuses lined up in their special slots, beside them was a padded area I knew he would keep his journal in. The journal was gone.

Running my hand lightly along the blankets he had slept beneath, I closed my eyes and remembered the feel of his body against mine. Thoughts of Luke intruded, and I shook my head to clear it. I had come into this room to get control of myself, not to get upset all over again.

I heard the sound of additional voices from the living room and turned to wipe my eyes in front of a nearby mirror. A moment later, I heard Jason call my name. When I didn't immediately reenter the

sitting room, I heard knocking, presumably on the door to my room. I shook my head and headed for the sitting room, entering just as Jason pounded hard on the door to my room.

"What is it?" I asked as I noted Basha and Nimaway standing just inside the room. Nina and Cormac looked like they had just exited from her room, and Stephen was standing against the wall near Jason.

"Are you ready to travel to Mopenos?" Basha asked.

"We need to get our things," Jason replied.

Everyone headed for his or her own bedroom, and when I passed Jason on the way to mine, he gave me an inquiring look. I smiled sadly up at him sadly, but didn't say a word. I picked up the bag Grendel had packed for me along with my computer case and reentered the sitting room. Within minutes we were all assembled.

"When we had an idea of your size, Lord Stephen," Nimaway was saying, "I arranged to have clothing prepared for you. It should be ready by the time we reach the Unknown."

"By the time we reach—" I began, and then Cormac joined me to finish, "the Unknown?"

Basha smiled. "That is what we call the mode of travel we will be using."

"You don't know how we're getting there?" Jason asked, confused.

"Yes, we know," Basha replied vaguely, "but we call it The Unknown."

I shot Jason an amused glance. "Scotty, beam me up."

Basha and Nimaway exchanged a bewildered look, and then he gestured toward the door. Most of us followed him out, but Stephen and Cormac remained in the room for several minutes.

Grendel took the case she had packed for me, but I chose to keep the computer case. Our luggage was loaded on a floating platform that waited for us in the hall. When the others joined us, their belongings were stacked on top and we walked down through the house and out into the gardens.

Jason walked at my side and I found myself glancing up at him from time to time. I wondered what he was thinking, if he was worrying about Lena or thinking about his lost faith. I didn't allow myself to believe he might have been thinking about me or about our relationship. His expression gave me no clues.

We followed a winding path that ended at a gazebo surrounded by trees. In the center of the gazebo stood a marble gateway. Basha and his wife approached it and he spoke into a microphone that was built into the side of the marble. "Mopenos."

As we watched, the area inside the gateway seemed to shimmer and shift until we could see into a large room. We could see a large set of double doors on the opposite wall flanked by tall windows. Basha pushed a button below the microphone and Nimaway stepped through the gateway into the room. She walked a few feet away, then turned and gestured for us to follow.

Nina stepped forward. "Shall we?" she said lightly, then stepped through and walked to Nimaway's side.

I looked at Jason and he caught my gaze. Abruptly he smiled and offered me his hand.

"We shall," I said as I laid my hand on his. Together we stepped through the gateway.

# ROYAL GREETINGS

Don't think that I can take another empty moment  
Don't think that I can fake another hollow smile  
Bed of Lies - Matchbox Twenty

We turned and watched Cormac and Stephen come through the gateway together. The air behind them shimmered and cleared, revealing the other end of the room.

"The Queen has arranged a luncheon at noon," Basha told us. "If it is all right with you, I would like to take you on a tour of the city."

We agreed, and he led us through the palace to the street outside. When we reached the street, he explained their problems with the ozone layer, and the solutions that their scientists had come up with. Their earth had been covered with a protective layer, and the weather control devices now determined everything from the length of the day to the amount of rainfall each ducal division had every year.

No one in Ramadan had seen the sun in over a hundred years.

"It would have been nice to see the sunset," Nina said longingly to Cormac. "I haven't seen a sunset in years."

I fell back a bit in my stride to walk beside Cormac. "Do you remember the sun?" I asked him softly. I hadn't really talked to Cormac about his amnesia, and I wondered exactly what he recalled of his mortal life.

He shook his head. "I remember almost nothing."

"Do you wonder about it?" I asked, remembering how I'd felt before actually seeing the sun two years ago. An old man had placed some sort of spell on a cloak so that I could escape the monastery safely, leaving Jason behind in the hands of the crone. "Do you watch movies and things like that to see what it is that you can't remember?"

"I've adjusted myself to not knowing what it was like," he explained.

I nodded and turned away. "It's just as well," I told him. "I've seen a sunrise, and it wasn't worth the price I paid for it."

He glanced at me, surprise written in his eyes. "You've healed well."

I smiled grimly. "It wasn't that kind of a price," I replied, remembering that awful morning at the monastery. I lengthened my stride to catch up with Nimaway and Basha.

Jason stepped up beside me. "And what price would it have been?" he asked me softly.

I glanced up at his face, then looked away. "The agony you endured on the altar at the monastery," I whispered honestly. I walked faster, unwilling to discuss such a sensitive subject among the crowd of people lining the streets.

"What do you mean?" he demanded softly, keeping pace with me. "How could you know that? There were only three people that know the full story of what happened there."

I looked up at him in surprise. "Know what story? I saw you bound to the altar by the mage with my own eyes," I told him. Tears filled those eyes at the memory. "I tried to go back for you, but the old man wouldn't let me. He said that I had to get what you had given me away from the monastery. I couldn't go back, but I should have. Maybe if I had—"

"Then do you think we would be here now, Christina, together like this?" he asked bluntly. "Something different would have happened and one of us might not be here now. Never look back, always look forward." He sighed deeply and looked down at me. "That is a lesson it took me two years to learn."

I shook my head, unwilling or unable to be soothed by his words. "That only works if you have something to look forward to." The only thing I had to look forward to was losing Jason again when we found Lena and clan punishment for my blood bond. And oh yeah, let's not forget about missing Luke, shall we?

Jason reached for my hand. "There is always something to look forward to in life," he told me.

When I felt the roughness of his fingers rub against mine, I glanced up at his face. I couldn't read his expression. "Is there?"

He squeezed my hand. "Eternity is a long time to be spent alone."

Jason's behavior confused me. Was he acting or did he truly care about me? Did he care enough about me to get past the pain of his changed life?

"What kind of currency do you use?" I heard Cormac ask Basha.

I was grateful for the distraction and slowed to listen. Jason matched my stride and refused to relinquish my hand when I tried to pull it away.

"Each ducal division mints their own coins," Basha replied, "except Perana, which uses coins from all divisions."

Cormac glanced at me and I pulled the coins we had found from my pocket with my free hand and gave them to him.

"Can you tell me what ducal division these are from?" he asked.

Basha took the coins. "Well, this gold one is from our own Bresilia. It is of small denomination. However, this silver one is worth a great deal. It is from Inferno, and normally one would have to be of sufficient wealth to own a great deal of land if you had one of these." He was plainly puzzled as to how we had gotten one, but too polite to ask.

"Do the ducal divisions exchange coins throughout?" I inquired.

He nodded. "All currency is readily available, but generally you would use them only in the ducal division they were minted in, and in Perana."

"Perhaps we should investigate Inferno," Cormac suggested.

Basha handed the coins back to me. "Normally you would be the woman of a large household if you owned one of these coins. Inferno is a matriarchal society."

I smiled and pocketed the coins. "That would fit Lady Tracy well," I commented. "She is the owner of a large holding in our world. How do we get to Inferno?"

"I will make arrangements for you to travel there after your meeting with the queen," Basha replied.

"Would it be possible for us to visit one of these shops?" Cormac asked.

Basha turned to look at the one Cormac was indicating. "Of course, Lord Cormac." Basha led the way inside. "If you see anything you would like, please allow me to make the purchase for you."

The shop Cormac had pointed out was obviously a magic shop. Once inside, we saw that it was overflowing with books pertaining to every type of magic except one, blood magic. We perused the shelves for several minutes, each of us separating and looking at tomes in different locations.

I found a general book on Thaumaturgy that was in Latin. I knew Antonio would be interested in learning things about this land, so I picked it up. A moment later I saw an ancient book called 'Old Tales of Love Spells' that was written in Russian. I shot a glance at Jason and when I saw that he was still across the room, I put it and the Thaumaturgy book on the counter to be wrapped up for me.

Overhearing a low conversation between Nina and Cormac, I realized that between them they knew many different languages. I became aware that one language they did not know was Russian. I

knew that Jason spoke the language, and I made a mental note to hold any personal conversations with him in Russian.

It was nearing eleven o'clock, and Basha led us back to the palace so that we could freshen up before meeting the queen. While changing, I asked Grendel to check the computer system for any information on Lord Malcolm, something I had forgotten to do the previous evening. She found nothing, which didn't surprise me.

Basha led us to a large round chamber. The throne room had a high ceiling with a glass dome in the center of it. Directly beneath the dome was a raised dais. Seated on a throne in the center of the dais was a beautiful blond woman with a crown on her head.

Standing to the queen's immediate right was another woman who looked so much like the queen that she must have been her twin. Just off the dais on the queen's left was a man I recognized as Rama from the pictures in Nimaway's sitting room. A pretty young woman stood beside him that I learned later was his betrothed, Ariel. Standing in various places around the room were what looked to be nobles and other high-ranking people.

Basha and Nimaway stepped forward together toward the dais. Jason offered me his hand and I took it hesitantly. I had told Jason that I wasn't afraid of being with him, but that hadn't been the entire truth; I feared that this time of closeness between us would destroy me when he left and drive me back to Luke's arms. Somehow I didn't doubt that he would eventually go back to California and Graves.

Nimaway performed a graceful curtsy as Basha bowed low to the queen.

"Basha," the queen said graciously, "it is good to see you. Thank you for all your help with our visitors. And Nimaway, it is wonderful to see you again. How are you?"

Nimaway smiled. "I am fine, majesty. Thank you for asking."

Annuanna turned to Basha. "Count Basha, please introduce our new friends."

Basha and Nimaway stepped to the right, leaving room for Jason and I to step forward. He bowed and steadied my hand while I curtsied and Basha introduced us. Jason led me to the left and the rest of our group stepped forward, bowing and curtsying to the queen.

I knew that meeting a Queen was like meeting a Kindred prince, but this situation seemed to make me more nervous than I could remember feeling in my life. My hand started to tremble in Jason's and I couldn't make it stop. Everything seemed to catch up to me at once; Lena's disappearance, discovering that I had a brother that my father had once tried to kill, the dream I'd had about my embrace, seeing Jason after all this time and feeling the changes his embrace had wrought on his body, missing Luke.

Luke had been my lifeline for so long, and I felt like I was adrift in a sea of confusion without him. He had always known what to do to make me feel better, and he always seemed to know what to say to a pretty woman like the queen. I wished Luke were with me to give me his support.

I felt Jason stiffen beside me and belatedly realized that I had whispered the words aloud. I looked up at him, and he slowly turned his head to gaze down at me. He tried to appear as if nothing was wrong, but I could read the pain in his eyes. He turned back to the queen without saying a word.

I closed my eyes in despair and berated myself mentally; how could I be holding the hand of the man I loved beyond all reason and wish my ex-lover were with me?

"I welcome you to my land," the queen said graciously. "Any resources that you might need are at your disposal. Basha has told me of the reason for your visit, that you are looking for a friend who is in danger. All of Ramadan is open for you. If you need men, knowledge or protection, you need only ask."

When no one spoke up right away, I gathered my courage. "Your majesty, it would be of great help to us if you could tell us where Lord Malcolm lives."

"I'm sorry," she explained, "I don't keep track of the minor lords in my kingdom. But I understand you have a photograph of the woman you are searching for?"

I took the photo from my pocket and handed it to the woman at Annuanna's side who stepped forward and took it from me. She handed it to the queen without looking at it.

Annuanna seemed startled when she looked at the picture and put a hand to her chest. She handed the photo back to her sister, who gasped.

"Is there something amiss?" I asked, afraid that something horrible had already happened to Lena.

"The woman is indeed familiar," Annuanna told me as the woman I later learned was Lady Kelly gave the photo back to me. "I had quite a lengthy conversation with Lady Tracy. I'm quite surprised to find that this is the person you seek, I was led to believe that she was kidnapped."

I glanced at Jason. "That is what we were led to believe as well," I replied.

"That is why I am so startled," the queen explained. "She was very nice, and didn't seem to be overly concerned about anything at all. She was very calm."

"That doesn't sound like our Lena," I commented with a frown. "If she's calm, she feels safe. She cares so much about those around her; if she had consented to come here, she would have left a message for her betrothed, a message for her friends, her family. She left no such messages."

From the corner of my eye, I saw a side door open and an oriental woman quietly enter the room. She walked over to Rama and stood watching the queen.

"I have ordered an afternoon luncheon that will give you an opportunity to speak with the aristocracy," Annuanna told us. "I can only apologize that Lady Tatiana is not here yet, I believe that she may be able to offer you some information. I do hope that nothing serious delays her."

"Please," she continued, "take this occasion to ask whatever questions you like of those gathered here."

At Cormac's request, Nimaway and Basha led him and Nina over to Rama and the oriental woman who had come in late. As I watched Stephen follow them, I realized that the woman was staring at Jason and me almost as if she recognized us. Jason and I exchanged confused looks, but we were both distracted as the queen's sister approached us.

She introduced herself as Lady Kelly and told us that she was Annuanna's twin. She offered to perform introductions for us to whomever we wished to speak to, and we began making the rounds.

We learned several valuable pieces of information. First, only a few people in the room had spoken to Lady Tracy, and all agreed that she did not appear to me harmed or frightened in any way. Second, Lena was apparently very interested in the health of the people of Ramadan, specifically regarding the diet and medical care available in this world. And third, no one knew the whereabouts of either Lady Tracy or Lord Malcolm.

Jason, Kelly and I had spoken to nearly everyone in the room when we heard the sound of someone clearing their throat behind us. Jason had kept hold of my hand the entire afternoon, and he didn't relinquish it now, merely stepped to the side so that we turned as one to face the woman who had seemed to recognize us. I returned her slight curtsy and Jason bowed to her.

"Pardon me," she said in a light melodious voice.

"High Priestess Maleeka," Kelly greeted the woman warmly. "It is good to see you. How are you?"

"I am fine, thank you for asking," Maleeka replied, then turned to Jason and me. "I must ask your forgiveness as I was late for the gathering and I did not hear your names announced, but are you Lord Jason Kline and Lady Christina Strong?"

Once again, Jason and I exchanged puzzled glances. We answered together, "Yes."

The High Priestess had been holding up a corner of her skirt and now she dropped it to reveal a note. She handed it to me, saying, "I was given this and told to watch for either of you."

The outside of the envelope had the horoscope sign for Aries on one side and our names on the other. I didn't immediately recognize the handwriting, but when Jason breathed Lena's name, I realized it was hers.

"Where did you get this?" I asked Maleeka.

"Lady Tracy gave this to me when she was a court nearly half a year ago," she replied. "She mentioned that people might follow after her and asked me to watch for those who came and pass this note along to them."

"Do you know where Lady Tracy is?" Jason inquired.

"I'm sorry," she told him. "I do not."

I turned the envelope in my hands and carefully opened it. I took a single sheet of paper out on which was a stylized drawing of a hand and these words; "Watch for these. I will help you if I can – L"

I glanced up at Jason and saw that he had read the words over my shoulder. I looked around for Cormac and saw him standing nearby. "Lord Cormac," I called softly. He turned. "Lord Cormac, could you come here for a moment?"

Cormac excused himself and walked over to us, followed closely by Nina and Stephen. "What can I do for you, Lady Christina?"

I held the note out to him. "Could you hold this for a moment?"

He took it and a look of calm came over his face.

Lady Maleeka seemed to be watching us with interest, but her attention was centered on Stephen. Before I could do more than wonder why, Stephen looked at the note Cormac held and murmured, "The Hand of Mystery; it is the symbol of healing and strength that provides the pathway to knowledge."

Just then, the main doors to the throne room slammed open and a lovely young woman entered the room. She wore a Spanish veil in her hair and a quarter moon pendant hung to the middle of her forehead. By this time, Annuanna was back on her throne, and she seemed shocked to see the newcomer. In fact, everyone in the room seemed startled by her dramatic entrance.

"Your majesty," the woman cried, tears in her voice and on her face. "I demand judgement!" She seemed desperate, as if something horrible had just taken place.

"Duchess," the queen responded in amazement, "what on earth has happened?" Annuanna looked behind the woman to the man who had followed her in. "Why is Colin with you? Where is Duke Rutgar?"

The duchess seemed to be barely holding on and tears streamed down her cheeks. "Rutgar is dead and I demand justice for his murder," she exclaimed.

Everyone in the room gave a collective gasp. Cormac handed me back the note and took a step closer to the dais.

Jason touched my shoulder and nodded toward the woman. Instantly I realized what he was pointing out; a white fan hung on her belt that had a symbol outlined in deep black. It was the same symbol Lena had left for us; the Hand of Mystery.

# A WOMAN'S PAIN

Take a look at the sky

Sometimes your heaven seems so far away

I Could Have Been You - Melissa Etheridge

"Tatiana, please," Annuanna said soothingly. "Calm yourself and tell me what has happened."

The duchess took a deep breath and looked down for a moment, gathering herself. She told of her husband not returning by dusk the previous night after making calls on the local tenants. Colin and a few other men had gone to look for him and returned with only his horse. Not far from where they had found the horse wandering, they had seen blood on a rock by the river, and signs of struggle. They had also seen evidence of a body being dragged into the river.

The entire room was shocked by Tatiana's story, and the queen immediately ordered the room cleared. When we moved to leave, she asked that our group remain behind. "I may have a favor to ask of you," she told us cryptically.

As everyone else left the room, Colin stepped to Tatiana's side and placed his hand in the small of her back to comfort her. She continued to cry quietly, but she seemed to calm somewhat at his touch.

Tatiana's distress at her husband's death drove daggers into my heart. I glanced up at Jason, remembering with agony the night in Paris when I had received a message from the crone telling me that Jason was dead. I had walked for hours that night through the streets of Paris, and I knew now that if Luke hadn't joined me, I would have walked until dawn and let the sunlight take me to where I had believed Jason to be. I clasped my hands tightly together at my waist to stop their trembling.

Jason's rough hand covered mine as he bent to whisper in my ear. "Is everything okay?"

I nodded and looked down, still shaken by the reminder of Jason's so-called death.

He seemed to read my mood and pulled me closer to his side. I clutched at his hand and leaned against him gratefully, knowing that our closeness couldn't last. Eventually he would remind me that Graves was more important to him than I was, and I would be forced to give him an ultimatum. I knew I would lose if it came to a choice between Graves and me, but I refused to take second place in Jason's life ever again.

"Duchess, do you know who would do this?" Annuanna asked softly.

Tatiana shook her head. "You know Rutgar, you know what kind of man he was," she told the Queen. "He had no enemies. He was a good man. He gave his services freely to the people."

"I know he was vocal in the push for change in the physician community throughout Ramadan," the queen said. "Some of the older doctors did not like that. Do you think that he could have pushed too far?"

"I really don't know, majesty," Tatiana replied. "You know that my time was spent with the people and that his skills in healing were his alone." She glanced up at Colin and shrugged. "It is possible that something else has happened, that is why I have come to you demanding judication."

Annuanna nodded. "I understand your need to find the truth, duchess." She looked over at us with a contemplative look in her eye. Tatiana followed her gaze and seemed to notice us for the first time.

"I know that you are here for other reasons," the queen told us. "Duchess Tatiana of Inferno has demanded judication. I know that the phrase means nothing to you, but in our world when something heinous happens, it demands a mediator from outside of the gentry. I understand that

you seek Lady Tracy, but perhaps you could begin your search in Inferno while investigating Duke Rutgar's disappearance."

At the mention of Lena's alias, Tatiana showed clear signs of recognition. She studied our group closely, especially Jason and me.

"Of course we will be willing to help, my queen," I told her, "given the aid you have been to us." Tatiana seemed visibly relieved at my words.

"I thank you for your help in this matter," the queen replied, then turned to the duchess. "I'm sure that you will wish to return to Inferno and begin the search immediately."

"Of course," she replied with a catch in her voice, "you know what Rutgar means to me." The queen nodded and stood. "I will leave you then in Tatiana's capable hands."

Colin led Tatiana toward the doors, explaining to us that we would have about an hour to prepare for the trip while he gave the duchess some time to calm herself.

We were shown to a suite that had been assigned to us and was nearly identical in layout as the one we had shared in Bresilia. While the ladies packed our things, I took the opportunity to ask Cormac what he had seen when he had held the letter from Lena.

"I did not see much," Cormac told me. "I would like to try again after I have rested."

"What did you see?" I asked intently.

"She was sitting with the High Priestess Maleeka. Nothing out of the ordinary, really, just sitting together speaking." Cormac seemed to think for a moment, then added, "Lena appeared to be holding her stomach."

I covered my eyes and turned away from the group, my suspicions about Lena's physical condition heightened by his words. Given Lena's illness the night she had disappeared, her interest in dietary and medical information, and Cormac's vision, I felt I could safely guess that Lena had been pregnant when she was last seen. I whispered a sharp obscenity.

"Does that mean something?" Cormac asked.

"What do you mean holding her stomach?" I demanded.

"It was more conscious than simply resting on the stomach," Cormac replied, "but it was not part of the conversation. Does that mean something to you, Christina?"

I looked up to see Cormac looking at me expectantly, but I shook my head. "I don't want to say anything until I'm sure." I glanced at Jason and wondered if he had reached the same conclusion that I had: if Lena was at court by herself showing no signs of compulsion or even fright over her fate, could she have gone with Lord Malcolm willingly? Could the baby she was possibly carrying be Lord Malcolm's and not Mikael's? "What would she be doing with him?" I murmured to myself.

Jason moved restlessly. "I would hope that she would not—" his voice broke, and he cleared his throat before going on. "I don't think that she would willingly participate in any kind of plan that he may hatch, but then again, I don't really know. I haven't spent a lot of time with her in the past few years."

"Not that you've spent time with any of your old friends," I reminded him, my voice hard. "Except, oh yeah, Graves."

"Did you ever stop to think that I needed time to allow myself to be near them?" he shot back.

Apparently it had never occurred to him that he was the only one I had wanted to be with for the last two years. "Whatever," I replied, holding my hand up as I turned away from him. I straightened my shoulders and resolved that I wouldn't let him goad me into an argument, not now. "I am not going there. I'm not."

Glancing over my shoulder I saw Jason walk to the window, helplessness and despair showing in every movement he made. I knew that he prayed as I did to find Lena before anything permanent happened to her. We both knew that bad things happened to good people regardless of the noblest intentions to stop it.

I turned and leaned a hand on the wall, my head down. My words and lack of control disgusted me. I had told myself when we came to Ramadan that I wouldn't argue with Jason because I knew that it would interfere with our search. Yet there I was wounding him at the first opportunity as if we were both some kind of animal. We were no closer to finding Lena, and learning that she might be pregnant put a new urgency on the matter for me. Fighting would only impede our progress.

In a burst of anger, I slammed my fist violently against the wall, making no sound when pain from the impact swept over me, through me. I cradled my hand and looked down to see that at least three of my fingers were broken. I waited for the agony to clear my head as it had in the past, but this time I waited in vain.

I heard a movement beside me and looked up, way up, to where Stephen stood in full Crinos form. He was over nine feet tall and probably close to a thousand pounds. The wolf-man smiled and I had to force myself not to take a step back.

"No, no," he growled, then held up his fist to demonstrate the words he spoke next. "Ball your fist up, reach way back, and assert yourself." With that, his fist drove deeply into the wall, burying his arm nearly to the elbow in the stone.

I mimicked his motions with my uninjured hand. "Ball my fist up, reach way back, and assert myself." I shot my fist toward the wall, but Jason's hand stopped it short.

"Not again," he said softly as he cradled my fist in his callused palm.

"What do you mean, not again?" I demanded, my voice still shaky.

"Don't hit it again," he whispered.

I had hoped that my emotions were in check, but they obviously were not. I felt the blood tears coursing down my cheeks and bit my lip to keep the sobs inside. I closed my eyes and felt Jason's rough fingertips wipe the tears from my face. I looked at him, and I'm sure that the pain I felt showed clearly in my eyes. I couldn't bear to see it mirrored in his.

"I just don't understand what's going on," I whispered, meaning both Lena's disappearance and Jason's behavior toward me.

"We'll find her," he promised. "We'll get this resolved."

I wanted to throw myself in his arms. I wanted the past two years to fade from our memories as if they had never existed. I wanted things to be like they were when he was mortal and I had known where I stood with him. I wanted him to tell me that I was the most important person in his life and that he would take care of me always.

But I knew that I could never have those things, that circumstances had changed between and around us, and we could never go back to those idyllic days we had shared before his abduction. Even if we could, I knew that Jason's feelings for Graves hadn't ended with his embrace and that the Gangrel would always stand between us. No matter how much Jason cared for me, there was a bond between the two of them that I couldn't hope to compete with. Jason would always care for Graves more than he ever cared for me.

I reached up hesitantly and ran my injured hand down his face, almost but not quite touching his skin. I'm not sure if he would have allowed the contact, but at that moment I couldn't have handled him moving away from my touch. For a moment I let the love I felt for him show on my face, then I pulled my other hand from Jason's and turned away.

"Thanks for the pointers, Stephen," I said in a tightly controlled voice to the monk who had returned to human form.

"Anytime, my child," he replied with a bow.

I walked to the door of my bedroom and closed it gently but firmly behind me. I knew that I was running from Jason, but I didn't know how much more I could take of being so close to him, yet so far away.

"Milady," Grendel said softly. "Your things are packed, and we are ready to go. Should I inform the duchess that we can leave at her convenience?"

I kept my hands behind my back so that she wouldn't see my injury. "That would be wonderful, Grendel."

She curtsied briefly, then exited the room with my luggage.

Taking deep breaths to control my tears, I went into the bathroom to wash my face. I healed my hand quickly, then removed all traces of tears from my cheeks. "The sooner we find Lena, the sooner we can go home," I whispered to myself. Then it occurred to me that I no longer had a home; Vegas was forbidden to me until I had conquered the Blood Bond.

After a few minutes, I rejoined the others and we returned to the Unknown room where we stood before the gateway and waited for Duchess Tatiana to activate the mechanism. I placed myself as far away from Jason as I could manage without making it look like I was avoiding him. The air inside the gateway shimmered slightly, and then changed to reveal a room similar to the one we were in.

Tatiana and Carlos stepped through, then turned and waited for us to join them.

Stephen startled me by offering his hand to me. "How's the hand?" he inquired.

I smiled and placed my hand on his, noting how smooth and warm his skin felt. "Fine," I replied gratefully. "Thanks to you, next time I won't break it."

Stephen returned my smile and led me through the gateway.

# OLD FRIENDS

I'm the gray and cloudy one  
Raining for so long, so long  
Sun - Concrete Blonde

We stepped into a basement storeroom, obviously often used, but nearly filled with crates. A set of steps led up to the street level, where we could hear and see horses, carriages and people passing. I turned to see that the others had joined us, and the gateway had cleared.

"We will go to my townhouse to drop off your luggage and do whatever freshening up you need to do," Tatiana told us. "Then I will take you to the site where Rutgar's horse was found, if that is all right."

"That's fine, milady," I replied for the group.

"I have called ahead and there is a carriage waiting for us." She gestured toward the stairs where the ladies in waiting were following the cart that held our luggage. When they had reached the top of the steps, Stephen led me forward.

When we reached the street level, Stephen stopped short. I stopped with him and looked around.

"What is it?" I asked.

"I believe I saw someone I know," he told me. A moment later he started across the street, still holding my hand.

As we approached the opposite side of the busy street, I saw that we seemed to be walking toward a pretty young girl in a lovely dress. She was blond, which was a change from the other people on the street, most of them seemed to be dark and not wearing very much.

When she noticed us, she stopped. Looking directly at me, she actually took a step back. I let go of Stephen's hand and stopped while he took a few more steps forward.

"Shannon? Is that you," he asked her as Cormac and Nina reached my side.

The girl seemed visibly relieved that I had stopped, and turned to look at the monk, almost with recognition on her face.

"It's me," he continued, "Stephen, Stephen Brennan."

"You seem to have me at a disadvantage, sir," she replied in an Irish brogue that was very similar to Stephen's. "Have we met?"

"Shannon O'Neal?" he said softly. "You're Shannon O'Neal, aren't you?"

"I'm having déjà vu," I whispered, shaking my head. Stephen and Cormac had had a similar conversation when they'd met in Las Vegas.

Shannon looked at me. "Interesting friends for your sort, is it not?" she asked Stephen. "Especially in a place such as this."

"They are friends of my uncle," Stephen replied, turning to look at Cormac. "My Uncle Cormac Brennan." Stephen stepped to the side so that he could see her and us without turning.

"I may not remember a lot," she said dryly, "but there are some things I distinctly recall."

Cormac bent to tell Nina something then he turned and whispered in my ear, "She's a werebeast."

"Jesus," I whispered in disgust. The last thing I wanted was to be around two shapeshifters, no matter how much I liked Stephen. I turned and walked back toward the carriage. Jason had been on his way toward us, and I met him in the middle of the street.

"What's going on?" he asked me.

"It's a puppy dog reunion," I told him wryly. "I figured that I'd be better off on that side of the road, since the last time I was at a puppy reunion I did not have a good time."

Jason looked at the others. "I too don't like the idea of becoming kibble," he commented, referring to the popular dog food.

I smiled. "Or bits, so I'm headed back to the carriage."

"I'll go with you," he said, offering me his hand.

I placed my fingers atop his hand, the roughness of his hand now a familiar sweetness. "I'll let you," I told him with a grin.

"Thank you," he returned with his own grin. "I appreciate it wholeheartedly."

This was the Jason I remembered, light hearted and teasing. I had missed the interplay we'd had, the way that he made me feel happy just to be with him.

When we reached the carriage, Lady Tatiana walked over to us. "Do you know if this is going to take a while?" she asked anxiously.

"No clue," I told her. Abruptly I realized that she seemed impatient. "We can always tell Stephen to catch up with us later."

"No," she replied, "that is fine. We can arrange whatever light is needed."

I glanced across the street. "Do you know that girl?"

She followed my gaze. "I have seen her before. Colin, do you know who she is?"

He too looked across the street. "Yes."

"I was told to warn Stephen to make sure not to manhandle her," Jason told me softly.

I smiled at the thought of the soft-spoken Stephen attacking a woman.

"Interesting, brother," the duchess murmured. "Do you know what interest our visitor might have in her?"

"Sister," he reminded her, "she is a visitor just as they are, however, she has no knowledge of where she is from."

"I think Stephen may have some knowledge of that," I murmured.

"Really," Tatiana said, "how nice for her."

"She has traveled Ramadan these last five years getting to know all of the people in our world," Colin told us. "She has published a cassette detailing her travels."

I wondered if she knew Lord Malcolm, then I realized that no one had asked our hosts if they knew him. I took the opportunity to do so now.

"Yes, I do know Lord Malcolm," Tatiana replied. "He has spent some time in Inferno."

"I haven't had the pleasure," Colin said.

"Is he in Inferno now?" I asked.

"Not that I know of," the Duchess told me. "I haven't heard from him in quite a while."

"Do you know of a Lady Tracy?"

"Why, yes," she replied, "I know of her."

I studied her face carefully. "Do you know where she is?"

"I'm afraid not," she said, "I haven't seen her since she made the gift of the fan to me. It was quite funny actually. Is she a friend of yours?"

"Yes," I told her. "When did she give you the fan?"

"When she visited me. Colin, you remember?"

He nodded. "The Lady Tracy, yes. She is a lovely woman, very compassionate, very intelligent."

"That's our girl," I murmured.

"She was very gifted in knowledge of computers," he added. "I had a long conversation with her when she visited."

"And how long ago was that?" I inquired.

"Quite a while," Tatiana murmured.

"Three months? Six months?"

"Close to six months ago," she replied. "I heard a few people at court speak of her, that they had seen her just before they came here."

"How was her health?" What I wanted was some indication that I had been right about her pregnancy.

"She appeared to be in fine health to me," Tatiana said, "as far as I know. They had spent the day in Mopenos."

"They?" I was confused. "Who is they?"

Tatiana seemed surprised. "Her and Lord Malcolm."

I turned away and gazed down the street, muttering an obscenity.

"Christina," Jason said sternly.

I glanced at him. "Yeah?" When I realized that the obscenity had offended him, I shook my head. "I'm sorry, I seem to have picked up a few bad habits in the last two years."

"I see that," he murmured.

"It must have been the company I was hanging with," I said, for a moment distracted by memories of Luke. I gazed across the street, lost in thought.

Suddenly I noticed an abrupt change in Nina and Cormac's body language. They took a collective step forward, and a moment later Cormac said something to Nina that made her turn and start across the street toward us.

"Excuse me," I said to Tatiana. Jason followed me and we met Nina in the center of the street. "Nina, what's—" I began.

"—going on?" Jason finished.

"She has met Lena, and seen her," Nina told us.

"Recently?" I asked.

"She saw her at the same time everyone else did, but she's also seen her recently," she replied, "in the last week or so in a carriage on the edge of town."

We turned and hurried to join the others.

"—where I saw her," I heard Shannon say as we got closer. She seemed to have calmed somewhat from the time I had left the group.

Cormac heard us coming and turned to block my approach. I looked over his shoulder at the girl, then demanded in a low voice what was going on.

"She has seen Lena and can give us directions to where," he told me. "You took off when I informed you what she was, do you think you can control yourself if she accompanies us?"

I was only mildly offended by his remark. I knew that I hadn't actually been a paragon of self-control since I'd known Cormac, and he had every right to think I was somewhat less than stable. "Are you saying that I have a problem controlling myself?" I asked him facetiously. Jason coughed and I shot him a heated look.

"I'm saying that you have a problem with werebeasts," Cormac replied.

I smiled wryly. "Only certain werebeasts that put me in boxes," I said, thinking of the pack in Italy that had captured me.

"This is the closest we have come," Cormac reminded me.

I sighed and nodded in agreement, looking over my shoulder at the Duchess and her brother. "We are also supposed to be helping Duchess Tatiana."

"Oh, yeah," Nina murmured from my side.

Jason sighed.

"You know," I told Cormac, "I don't think I have as big a problem with her as she has with... me." I was going to say 'vampires', but I didn't think it would be a good idea in the middle of the street.

"She has amnesia," Cormac replied.

I threw up my hands. "Well, lets have a bloody party, shall we?" To think that I used to believe amnesia was an uncommon ailment. Under my breath I repeated the obscenity that had offended Jason earlier.

"Christina," Jason reminded me patiently. "Language."

Cormac cleared his throat. "If I may, she has neither seen another Garou nor one of our kind for at least five years. She does not remember much, but she knows what she is and what we are." He glanced back at her. "It rather took her aback to suddenly be surrounded by our kind."

I nodded. "Considering there aren't any of us here."

"That we know of," Cormac agreed.

I took a deep breath. "Okay. I can deal with her if she can deal with me."

Cormac nodded and moved to stand beside Stephen.

"I would be willing to help with the investigation," Shannon was telling the monk, "in return for going home and learning of my past."

"Is she offering to help with Lena or the Duke?" I asked of no one in particular.

"Yes," Stephen replied.

Jason took a step forward and once more the girl showed signs of nervousness. I put my hand on his shoulder and pulled him back.

"The puppy doesn't like Kindred," I told him.

Immediately both Shannon and Stephen looked at me with heat in their eyes. I swallowed dryly, remembering that same look on the face of the pack members in Italy just before they had thrown me in their makeshift coffin and nailed me inside.

"It's okay," Jason soothed, taking a step to the side.

"I'm sorry," I apologized sincerely. "Nothing personal, honestly." I shot Jason a bleak look, remembering a time when he would have kept himself between the werewolves and me until he was sure the danger to me was past. I couldn't stop myself from thinking that Luke would certainly have done so, and defended me to the last drop of blood within his body.

Cormac spoke up. "You will have to excuse my friend, she had a rather traumatic experience with several of your kind, but not of your tribe."

Shannon eased up a bit and shot me an unreadable glance. "For the past five years I have traveled this world. A very wise old Blackfoot Indian once told me that it was situations like that that damn you in every other situation."

I raised an eyebrow at her while Jason whispered that in fact we were already damned.

"She is still learning," Cormac told her. "We would appreciate your assistance."

I wasn't sure if I appreciated Cormac's help with the girl, but at least his words were smoothing things over.

Shannon made a short bow in my direction. "Then by the grace of Gaia, I will endeavor to help wipe away the harshness that others of my kind have placed on her memory."

I acknowledged her bow with a nod. "I will welcome the opportunity to learn."

"That is all that Gaia can ask for," she replied.

"If there are no further delays," Cormac said, "our hosts have been patient long enough." He offered his hand to Nina and she placed her hand atop his.

Jason held his hand up. "Although since this is a matriarchal society, you should be offering to me," he said with a smile.

I grinned and held my hand up for him, which he took with a chuckle. We turned and followed Cormac and Nina, although I was reluctant to have two werewolves at my back. Was I feeling a bit too paranoid? Not really, I was just being careful.

"I was given the name Violeta when I was found in the meadow," I heard Shannon tell Stephen as they followed us across the street.

"It is good to see you again," Colin told Shannon when we reached the carriage.

She let go of Stephen's hand and kissed Colin's cheek. "It is good to see you as well," she told him. "Did you get through the volume I gave you?"

He smiled at her. "Yes, as a matter of fact I did. I am trying to get my sister to listen to it as well."

Shannon looked shyly at the Duchess. "I'm sure a woman of such standing would not be interested in listening to something that a lowly girl such as myself has composed of her travels. She has probably seen the same things that I have and more."

I rolled my eyes at her modesty.

"I'm very sorry to hear about the Duke," she continued. "He and I had spent some time together discussing his practice and his views of the world. I respected him a great deal, he will be sorely missed."

Tatiana's eyes were damp, but she smiled bravely. "Thank you for your wonderful words," she told Shannon. "Will you be accompanying the Judicars?"

Shannon seemed very surprised to hear us called that, and gave each of us another thorough look before answering. "I have offered my services to Lord Stephen and his friends in the hopes of learning more about my past and finding out what happened to Duke Rutgar."

"Then without further ado," Colin said, stepping toward the carriage, "let's be off." He assisted first Tatiana then Shannon into the carriage, then held his hand out to me. I took it, showing none of the reluctance I felt as I sat down next to Shannon.

When Nina got in, she quietly asked if I would please change places with her, and I gratefully moved to the other side of the carriage. Jason sat beside me, joined by Cormac and Stephen on the seat. Colin closed the door and climbed up beside the driver. The driver clucked to the horses and as we began to move, my fingers found the ring on my left hand and began turning it, a habit I had picked up when I had worn the ring before. It seemed that two years of not wearing the ring hadn't been enough to break me of the habit.

# POINTING THE WAY

Forces puffin' from the center of the earth again  
I can feel it  
Lightning Crashes - Live

The duchess pointed out various buildings of interest to us as we traveled toward her town house. About ten minutes into our journey, I noticed a large temple of some sort ahead of us on the right. It was a modern building by my standards, probably built with some type of cement. It had a wide portico, and many large columns. A balcony wrapped around the upper floor above huge doors that were open revealing a church like area inside.

As we got closer I saw that hanging from the balcony were many colorful flags. It took me a minute to realize that one of them bore the Hand of Mystery.

"Jason, do you see that?" I whispered.

"Hmm?"

"The flag on the balcony," I told him. "The hand."

Shannon turned to look where I pointed. "Duchess, is that not the same symbol as the one on your fan?"

"Why yes," she said when she had seen it, "it is."

"Is that a new flag?" I asked, wondering at her surprise.

"I don't pay attention to that building," she said dismissively.

I looked back at the temple. "Do they have different flags up at different times?"

"To tell you the truth, I pay no attention to the building," she repeated impatiently. Indeed, it was not one that she had pointed out to us.

I asked Shannon if she knew, but she didn't. "What is the building?" I inquired.

"Is this the other place you were talking about?" Jason asked. "The one where men are in charge of religion?"

"Yes," Tatiana answered, obviously disliking the idea, "it is."

I didn't understand her censure. "Do you disapprove of men being involved in religion?"

"With the exception of this order and a few others," she told me, "they aren't. It is so..."

I smiled. "They tend to get rather anal about it, don't they," I said in an amused voice, knowing full well what kind of response that that statement would receive given the others in the carriage.

Nina gasped and Jason turned to look at me. When I returned his gaze I saw that Stephen had done the same. I covered my mouth with my hand to stifle a giggle and looked away. Shannon seemed dumbstruck by my statement, and I had to bite my lip to stop from laughing aloud.

"What is the building?" Jason asked.

"That is the temple of the Brotherhood of Everlasting Peace," she informed him.

Jason turned to look at the temple once more. "Are we in a hurry or could we stop in for a minute?"

"We can stop if you wish," she said, "but there would be no one there today."

"Is there a reason why it is closed?"

"No, it is not closed," the Duchess explained, "You may leave offerings if you wish, but the monks are not generally in the temple except on Tuesdays."

I suddenly sobered, remembering my promise to the priest in Notre Dame. "What day is it today?" I asked, having completely lost track in the turmoil of our journey.

"It is Wednesday," Tatiana told me.

I turned my face away from the others and rubbed my forehead. I'd told the priest that I would try to be in church on Sunday, but I had forgotten my promise as soon as I'd left Paris.

Jason leaned forward with his elbows on his knees. "Where are they any other day of the week?"

"They are out at the monastery grounds outside of town," she replied. "It is not far from my country home."

"How convenient for us," I murmured. I noticed that Stephen was still glaring at me. I put a hand on Jason's back and leaned behind him, ignoring the irregularities I felt beneath the fabric of his shirt. "I was only joking," I told Stephen quietly. "I realize that sometimes I'm uptight, but occasionally I do joke around."

"Monks are not known for their humor," he replied quite seriously.

I shook my head, barely containing my humor. "Neither are priests," I whispered loudly.

Jason put his head down and laughed softly. I sat back and our laughter mingled for the first time in two years. I can't begin to describe how good it felt, how warm it made me feel inside. Our eyes met and we gradually sobered. I looked away, unable to bear feeling that close to him without any kind of resolution between us.

# THE RIVER

Oh and twisted thoughts  
That spin round my head  
Black - Pearl Jam

Some time later we drove through the gates of a large home and the driver pulled the carriage up to the steps.

"The ladies brought your luggage in another carriage," Tatiana informed us, suddenly impatient again. "If there isn't anything you needed, I could take you to the area by the river now."

"By all means," I told her, sympathetic to her need for resolution.

Colin dismounted and approached Tatiana's side. "Sister, the past day has been quite trying for you," he reminded her soothingly. "Please allow me to take them to the river. You should go in the house and rest."

I frowned and leaned forward. "I know what it is like when a man who is important to a woman is missing," I told him. "I believe she has the right to come with us. She has a right to know what is going on."

Tatiana smiled sadly and for the first time I noticed how exhausted she looked. She probably hadn't slept at all the previous night. I remembered looking in the mirror and seeing the same haunted look in my own eyes when Jason had been missing.

She turned to her brother. "I think that is a good idea, Colin. You know what has happened and you can show them. I haven't been to the site and I'm not sure if I can bring myself to go there just yet." She gave me a weak smile. "I thank you for your concern, and under any other circumstances I would be right in the thick of things, but it's just a little too fresh right now."

I nodded, remembering when it had been too fresh for me. I had made mistakes then, too many to count. "Again, I understand, duchess." I sat back and turned away to look out over the courtyard, seeing only the dark woods of Italy in my mind.

"Give them whatever they need," Tatiana told Colin. He helped her from the carriage then rejoined the driver. Tatiana made her way slowly up the steps, several servants coming out to help her into the house as we pulled away.

Stephen moved to the opposite seat beside Shannon, and Cormac motioned for Nina to join him. When she did, he asked her about a book he had given her to read. Jason joined the conversation, and Stephen talked quietly with Shannon.

I watched the passing countryside, hoping with every hoof beat that Tatiana's husband was not dead, and that Lena was unharmed. Unconsciously I twisted the ring Jason had given me and idly wondered what Luke was doing at that moment, what he had thought when he'd come home to find all of my things gone. It saddened me that he might believe I had a choice in leaving him, but perhaps it was for the best.

I was very conscious of Jason at my side, reading a book that Cormac had pulled from his pack. Again I wondered why he was being so warm to me. I wasn't sure if I would do the same for him if he'd been the one to fail me, but I half suspected that he might be playing some sort of game with me. I thought about what would happen when this was over and we went our separate ways. I didn't know if I could handle losing him again, and thought perhaps that I should distance myself from him in preparation.

Jason startled me by touching my arm. "Do you understand what this passage says?" he asked me, watching my face intently.

"Hmm?"

"This passage," he said, indicating a line in the book he was holding. "Do you understand what it says?"

I looked down and saw that Cormac had given him the Love Spells book written in Russian he had also purchased. I glanced at Jason quizzically, wondering if he knew that I had learned Russian from Lena.

"When she gives her heart to you," I translated easily, watching his face, "never turn it away."

"Ah," he murmured, contemplating the text. His face was unreadable.

"I thought you knew Russian?" I asked.

"It's been a while," he replied.

"It's been a while for me too," I told him, "and I didn't have that much of an exposure to it." Lena had taught it to me when we were travelling from the Holding to Los Angeles and on to Moscow.

Jason shrugged and gave me a heart-stopping grin. "You're a woman, I'm just a guy."

I rolled my eyes at him.

"Hey, at least I admit it," he added.

"After two years," I replied wryly. "Although, have you really admitted to anything except the fact that I speak Russian better than you?"

Jason looked at me, apparently confused by my words. He opened his mouth to speak, but the driver reined in the horses and whatever he'd been about to say was lost.

We stopped near the river's edge and a group of metal stakes with flashing lights on them. Colin assisted in helping the ladies from the carriage, and we approached the area. He pressed a sequence of buttons on a control panel and the lights stopped flashing.

Colin explained that this was the locale in which the evidence had been found. It had been cordoned off to prevent damage to the scene. The area was only about ten feet long and seven feet wide at its widest point. Nina and I followed Stephen and Shannon as they walked around the perimeter of the area. I stopped at the mid-point of the perimeter and studied the scene.

It looked like a struggle had taken place, and someone had fallen against a group of rocks. There was a dark liquid on them that I could tell by the smell was blood. It also looked as if someone had dragged a body into the river.

I watched Cormac take out the device that Lady Kelly had given him and begin to examine the ground. He took blood samples and photographs, following the signs of struggle and the indentations in the sand, careful not to disturb the scene. He bent to study an object on the ground and stood a moment later with something in his hands.

When he had moved away from the rocks, I entered the perimeter and approached them. I crouched down and touched the blood to see what information I could determine from it. It was definitely human, and at the time it had been spilled, the person had not lost very much blood. I straightened and looked to where Jason stood looking down at the river.

"Is this a carving in the sand?" we heard Shannon say.

I left the cordoned off area followed closely by Jason and went to look at what she was pointing at. In the sand was a drawing that had been partially obliterated by a careless footprint.

"Oh, my God," I whispered.

"The Hand of Mystery," Cormac murmured from inside the perimeter. He snapped a photograph of it with the device in his hands.

"I think we should visit the monastery," I told Jason.

"I think that would be a good idea," he agreed.

"God, that scares me," I whispered. "I don't like the idea of going to a monastery, but..."

Jason shot me an unreadable glance. "Like I like the idea."

"Good point," I said softly. I knew he was referring to the two cataclysmic incidences that had happened at the monastery in Italy. The first had made him Graves' ghoul; the second had made him Kindred.

"Three times is not a charm," he said firmly. "After the first two, I'm not looking forward to a third."

"It is a different monastery," I reminded him. I touched his arm to get his attention. "And I wouldn't leave you behind again," I promised him.

Cormac was talking to Colin about the Duke, perhaps confirming who he had seen when he had held the object he'd picked up.

"Did you get a sample of the blood?" Colin asked.

"Yes."

"There is still time to travel to Brookemar University to get the blood analyzed and see if it's Rutgar's," Colin said.

"Is it near the monastery?" I asked Colin.

"It is on the way there," he replied.

"The hand is in the letter, on the fan, in the sand, and at the monastery," Jason murmured to himself. "Lena said she would guide us."

"That she would help us if she could," I corrected him. "I think we should go to the monastery."

He looked back at the mark in the sand. "The marks are leading us in a straight line," he said keeping his voice low. "Perhaps this is not what we think."

I didn't like what I thought he was saying. "Why would Lena be involved with him?" I asked, matching his tone.

He shrugged. "She's been here a long time, perhaps she needed someone to trust."

I shook my head. "But him of all people?" There were only a few people that I trusted implicitly, and Lena was one of them. I refused to believe that she would be in league with this Malcolm.

He looked away. "If he's who I think he is, then I have a feeling he could look like anybody."

I frowned. "Why would she hang with anybody that looked like... that? I don't get it," I told him firmly. "This whole thing is screwed."

Jason shook his head. "I don't understand any of it either."

I took a breath to calm myself. "We need to go to the monastery. I don't like this whole situation. I don't like thinking that she could be pregnant here in this world with that... thing."

Jason looked at me as if surprised at my words. "For a while I thought that this could possibly be the one who created me, but if he has fathered a child, then it can't possibly be him."

"If it's his child," I reminded him. I hoped it was Mikael's, or even that I was wrong in the first place to think that she was pregnant.

He was silent for a moment. "Why would the mage want her?" he wondered aloud.

I gave him an even look. "Why would he want you?"

"I don't know," he whispered.

I shook my head. "Okay, let's just take an intuitive leap here and say that somebody's trying to get to Graves."

Jason nodded. "I agree."

"Hey, I've got the solution," I said, my voice deadly serious, "let's kill Graves and take care of the whole problem."

He shook his head and sighed heavily.

"It makes sense," I told him. "No one else gets taken, no one—" my voice broke and I turned away from him, unable to continue.

"Shall we be off," Colin asked all of us, "and see what we can find out while there is still day left?"

"I love hearing that," Jason murmured as we turned to walk toward the carriage.

I shot him a sideways glance. "You've heard my opinion of daylight." A sudden thought hit me and I chuckled. "Let's go, we're burning daylight."

"It's artificial," Cormac reminded me.

"We're still burning it," I said as Colin helped me into the carriage.

Jason, Nina and Cormac returned to reading while we traveled toward the University while Shannon and Stephen talked quietly. I sat back and thought about the reason we were in Ramadan looking for Lena, the Kindred responsible for all our troubles: Graves.

I turned the ring on my hand and thought about how different my life was now than it had been before I'd met Jason. I had been happy then, or at least content with my life and my friends. Graves' meddling in my life had changed everything. Through him I had met my father, fallen in love with Jason, and gone through both the best and worst moments in my life.

If not for Graves, Jason would not have been embraced, Lena would not have disappeared. I would not have met my brother, and I probably would never have deepened my relationship with Luke. For that matter, I probably would have died in the hotel room Jason had saved me from in San Francisco. After contemplating the entire situation, I didn't know if I should hate Graves more or less for his interference.

# BROOKEMAR UNIVERSITY

Oh, help me please, is there someone who can make me  
Wake up from this dream?  
Spending My Time - Roxette

Nearly an hour later we entered the gates of a large University. The carriage pulled up a long drive past many huge buildings. We disembarked near a large building with the words 'Ethan J. Sissler Technology Center' blazed on a nearby sign.

Colin led us down a pathway into a center courtyard of sorts. There were several areas where it was apparent that outside classes were held. In one such area, two men in kilts held a class on firearms. Jason, Cormac and I slowed to watch.

"Nina, can you believe it?" I asked. She'd told me shortly after we'd met that she didn't believe in guns. I turned to see her catching up with the others. "I guess she didn't believe in watching," I told Cormac with a grin.

He smiled, but after a moment continued on with the others.

Jason and I hesitated, watching the charismatic teacher explain the basic features of the apparently antiquated weapon to his students. He lifted the gun and fired toward a target, hitting it dead center. Many of the women in the class were obviously over-impressed.

"Oh, please," I muttered, disgusted.

"You noticed that as well?" Jason said, amused.

At that point I noticed that the teacher's assistant was looking in our direction. Actually, he was looking at me and smiling. I returned his smile as the teacher poked him in the arm, reminding him that he held the next weapon that the instructor wanted to discuss. The man turned sheepishly and handed the gun over, then looked back at me and shrugged. I covered my face with my hand and hid a laugh.

Jason and I continued to listen to the lecture, but a lot of the information was over my head. I had never had any formal training with guns, Jason had been the one to give me my first handgun and show me how to use it. I had gone to the shooting range in an effort to improve my skill, but never taken lessons. The instructor gave a few pointers on sighting shots that I found very useful.

During the lecture, the assistant continued to cast glances my way, and the instructor had to continually prompt him for the things he needed. I thought the whole thing was amusing and smiled at the man again, which further diverted his attention from the class.

"Who is that?" I heard one girl whisper to another. I glanced at the students and saw that several of the girls were looking curiously at me.

"Bitch," the other girl replied.

I smiled sweetly at the pair. "I believe we are distracting the poor boy," I told Jason. "Perhaps we should catch up with the rest of our group."

He offered me his hand and I laid my fingers on top of his. We went into the building we had last seen the group heading for and asked at the desk if they had come through there. Colin had left instructions with the receptionist for us, and we followed them, entering a lab in the basement of the building.

The others were talking to a pretty woman with a dark complexion. She was holding a dual vial of blood and explaining something to them. "He gave me these two blood samples from a test subject, one from before and one after the contraction of a disease. He wanted me to run some tests on them and see if I could duplicate the enzyme that causes the disease."

Jason's interest was peaked. "That causes the disease?"

The woman noticed us as we approached, and held her hand out to us. "I'm Doctor Celeste Ronanda," she said while she shook my hand. "How ya doin'?"

"Christina Strong," I told her.

"Jason Kline," he said as he shook her hand.

"Causes the disease?" Nina and Cormac said together, drawing the doctor's attention back to the group.

"Did he mention the test subject's name?" Cormac asked her.

"No, because he's a goon," she replied with a shrug. "He comes around once in a while and I tell him I've been too busy to look at it."

"When was the last time he came in?" Nina inquired.

Cormac made an impatient gesture with his hand. "Did he leave a forwarding address?"

Celeste shrugged again. "No, I told you, he's a goon. And I probably wouldn't have taken it down anyway. This blood's been here at least two years."

"He hasn't been around since?" Nina asked.

"Nothing in the last six months?" Jason interjected.

"You said he comes around," Nina reminded her.

"It's been a while," Celeste replied.

"Excuse me," I said softly. "Are you talking about Lord Malcolm?"

"Yeah," the doctor said. "The whack-a-dill. Do you know him?"

"Okay, let me get this straight." I took a breath to collect my thoughts. "Lord Malcolm gave you blood samples from before and after a test subject contracted a disease about two years ago."

"Yeah, that sounds about right," she replied.

I looked meaningfully at Jason.

"Ah," he murmured as he put his hands in his pockets. He seemed startled for a moment, and pulled out a piece of paper from his pocket.

"I don't know where he got the samples," Celeste continued, "and I didn't ask. I don't like the guy."

"What is it?" I asked Jason.

He didn't answer, so I moved to peer over his shoulder. I caught a glimpse of a hand written note with Jason's name at the top before he turned so that I couldn't see it.

"In a minute," he said.

I felt a tug on my sleeve and turned.

"I'll just take these blood samples over here to check them out," Nina said pointedly, gesturing toward an empty counter across the room.

I glanced at Jason, then looked at the blood samples in Nina's hand. Whatever it was that Jason had could wait. "Okay, I'll come help you," I told her.

We walked across the lab where, keeping her back to the group, Nina put the samples down. I could see the dates clearly and knew them well; one was labeled 11/6/97, just after Jason was abducted from the monastery. The other was marked 11/19/97, about the time that Luke, Lena and I were in Moscow looking for Jason.

I stared at the older sample, knowing that it was Jason's blood from before his embrace. I remembered distinctly the taste and the heat of it.

Nina opened the newer sample and touched the blood, barely wetting her finger. "Tenth generation," she murmured, looking up at me. "Newly embraced, he'd never fed."

I reached forward and opened the other vial. I put my finger a half-inch into the substance then brought it to my mouth, cleaning the blood from it. "Jason," I moaned softly at the heady taste that was, except for the temperature, exactly as I remembered it; human, but ghoulified to a low generation Gangrel.

I looked over at Jason and was shocked to see him standing against a newly broken desk, his arms crossed in front of him. His eyes were wild and he was shaking like a leaf. A moment later I was at his side taking him into my arms. He was stiff at first, then he gradually let me gather him closer. He put his arms around me and I pulled him toward a corner where we would have more privacy.

When he spoke it was more a growl than words, but still I understood. "I'm gonna fucking kill him," he told me. I'd never heard him use such harsh language before.

"Tell me," I urged. I was afraid of his anger, but I couldn't let him deal with whatever had upset him alone. I held him close and stroked the irregular muscles of his back.

He didn't answer, just continued to tremble in my arms and grip me tighter.

"Give me the note," I told him.

"It's in my pocket," he whispered.

I reached down, slid my hand in his pocket, and took out the note. Still holding him in my arms, I read it. My blood ran cold.

JASON,  
I M GLAD TO SEE YOU FARE WELL, MY TWISTED ONE. YOUR FATHER WILL BE HAPPY TO KNOW YOU ARE THRIVING.  
I SEE YOU HAVE COME IN SEARCH OF YOUR FAIR FRIEND. SHE IS EXCEPTIONAL AND I HOPE OUR DEAR FRIEND MR. GRAVES WILL JOIN THE PARTY.  
I BELIEVE SHE WILL MAKE A WONDERFUL ADDITION TO YOUR FAMILY. HAVE YOU EVER HAD A SISTER?  
I WONDER IF HER SKIN WILL BE GREEN OR YELLOW.  
NO MATTER, IT WILL BE SOME TIME YET BEFORE I KNOW. HATCHLINGS TAKE DELICACY AND TIME.  
I LL SEE YOU SOON, AND DON T FORGET TO BRING TALON.  
MALCOLM

"Jesus fucking Christ," I whispered, repeating the obscenity that Jason had so disliked hearing earlier.

Jason just buried his face in my hair. "And then some."

I folded the note and put it in my pocket, my mind racing furiously. I leaned my head against Jason's and closed my eyes, absently noting the rough, dry feel of his skin against my cheek. I knew that there was no way to get Graves here in time to save Lena. Given his penchant for putting others in danger, I wasn't sure he would come if there were a way to get him there in time. Then again....

"You've been practicing looking like Graves, right?" I asked Jason, remembering the guise I had first seen him in at the Holding.

"Yeah."

"That could work." I rubbed my smooth cheek on his coarse skin, enjoying the sensation.

"Who's going to look like me?"

I shrugged. "We don't need anybody to look like you."

"It's pretty obvious, Christina," he whispered wryly.

"But you can look like anyone," I reminded him. "Who's to say one of us isn't you?"

He nodded reluctantly. "True."

I heard Cormac's voice behind me. "Is everything all right?"

Jason raised his face from my hair and growled.

I leaned away from him and put my hand on the side of his face, stroking the coarse skin and forcing him to look at me. "Jason, chill out." I whispered soothingly, using my voice and my will to calm him down.

When he eased somewhat, I turned to look at Cormac and Nina, keeping my hand on Jason's shoulder. "No, it's not all right," I told him, "but it will be."

"Pardon me for intruding," Cormac inquired politely, "but can I ask what's going on?"

I dropped my hand and leaned against Jason, grateful that he had left his arm around my waist. "Let's just say that Lord Malcolm is going to die a horrible death as soon as we find him."

Nina seemed puzzled. "Wasn't that the plan in the first place?"

"It was," I told her, "but now it's even more urgent."

"We won't be quite as nice as we would have been," Jason added, his voice deep and gravelly.

"What has he done?" Cormac asked.

I shook my head. "It's not what he's done, it's what he's going to do." I straightened away from Jason, but he kept his hand on my waist. "By the way, I believe you both know Graves, right?"

Cormac's eyes widened. "I've met him."

"Just for the record," I told them, "this is Graves and I'm Jason." I glanced at Jason to see that Graves had taken his place. He was well over six feet now, and every motion, all of his body language had changed to that of Talon Graves. "I can't stand the son-of-a-bitch," I breathed, unconsciously stiffening beside him.

Jason dropped his hand and looked at me with Graves' cold blue eyes. "It was your idea," he reminded me with Graves' voice. His long blond hair was pulled back and tied with a piece of string. It reminded me of the way Luke often wore his hair, although Graves looked nothing like Luke.

I met his gaze evenly. "I can deal," I told him. I hoped that I could.

"Okay," Nina said, "so he's Graves. How are you Jason? And how and why exactly is it necessary for Graves to be here?"

I took a step further away from Jason, trying to distance myself from the Kindred he looked so much like. "Malcolm wants Graves and Jason." I motioned toward the disguised man. "Obviously he's the only one who can look like Graves, therefore he *is* Graves. Jason can look like anyone, and I'm almost the right height." Jason is a few inches taller than I am, but I didn't think that would matter. Malcolm knew he was Nosferatu and what his abilities were likely to be.

Nina nodded. "Okay."

Cormac wasn't so easily convinced. "What does Lord Malcolm want with Jason and Graves?"

I glanced quickly at Jason, still disconcerted at his new image and unwilling to upset him. "What do you know about what happened to Jason?" I asked Cormac.

He shrugged. "Very little. I have seen him in some of my Spirit's Touch visions."

"With Lord Malcolm? Lord Chaos?" I asked, remembering our conversation in the meadow when we first arrived in Ramadan.

"Yes," Cormac replied. "In a church."

"A monastery," I corrected him. I tried to choose my words carefully. "Lord Malcolm took Jason two years ago and that was how he became embraced."

"Lord Malcolm embraced him?"

Apparently I had taken too much care. "No, it was through one of his associates that Jason was embraced. Malcolm intends the same for Lena. Obviously we cannot allow that to happen."

Cormac nodded. "I believe I also saw Jason's sire."

I heard a sharp noise from Jason and looked to see that he had dropped his fangs. Pushing aside my distaste for his appearance, I stepped close to him once again and put my hands on his shoulders. "Jason, you have to calm down," I told him soothingly.

"He was very short," Cormac said almost absently from behind me. "His skin was—"

"Pea green," Jason said softly, putting his hands on my waist. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

"—pea green," Cormac finished.

"He had a scar on his forehead," Jason murmured. He pulled me closer and rested his temple on mine. I closed my eyes against the pain in his voice.

"There was a scar on his neck," Cormac continued. It was almost as if he was looking inward and not hearing Jason's words at all.

Jason nodded. "Yes."

"And one on his forehead." Cormac thought a moment, then added in unison with Jason, "There was red around his eyes."

Their description rang alarm bells in my head. I remembered the Nosferatu I'd shot the night Luke had almost died in Nashville. I took Jason into my arms, knowing that his sire would have a personal grudge against Lena because she had shot him that night, too.

"We need to go to the monastery," I whispered.

Jason pulled back and looked at me with Graves' eyes. "Are there any Thaumaturgical rituals that could change your appearance?"

I shook my head and moved away from him again, the very sound of Graves' voice grating on my nerves. "I can regrow my hair or make it hard for you to see me," I told him simply. "That's about it, it's not like your Obfuscate." That was what Jason's Nosferatu ability was called.

Shannon approached our group. "Dr. Ronanda has invited everyone to a small University gathering this evening," she told us from what I believe she felt was a safe distance. "There will be a special speaker."

"Who?" Jason demanded in the arrogant way Graves had, pretending not to recognize the name.

"Dr. Ronanda," she repeated, keeping her attention on Cormac. She seemed to be the least threatened by him, probably because he was Stephen's uncle.

"You saw her," Nina reminded Jason.

"Talon," I said, knowing that Jason was in full undercover mode, "it's the doctor over there."

Shannon looked at Jason for the first time since joining us and started in surprise. "Damn vamps are everywhere," she muttered resentfully.

I suppressed a laugh. "Wait, do I sense hostility toward an entire race due to something that only one has done?" I asked her. "Isn't that... racism?"

Cormac shot me a warning glance. "Ladies, we have several tasks at hand," he chastised us.

"Yes," I agreed, sobering. "The monastery."

"There will be a guest speaker here tonight from the monastery," Shannon repeated. "Do we accept the invitation?"

"Did she say who the speaker was?" Cormac inquired.

Shannon shook her head. "One of the higher ups."

"Do you know what time the speech is?" Nina asked. "We'd like to visit the monastery if we have time."

Jason looked at each member of the group in turn. "Does someone want to fill me in on what's going on?" he demanded in a Graves-like fashion.

"The monastery," I told him. "It is possible that Lena is there. You remember the stylized hand I told you about? We've been following them and they seem to lead us to the monastery." I shook my head, unable to stop myself from adding, "I really wish Christina could have stayed, she probably would have explained this much better."

Shannon gave me a strange look, then spoke to Nina. "The speech is this evening, about four hours from now."

"Well," Nina replied, "we did want to go to the monastery."

Colin joined us, looking a bit dejected. "I just spoke with the monastery," he told us. "They have informed me that they are not accepting visitors today. They will be happy to accept any visitors tomorrow of the male persuasion that wish to enter the grounds. Unfortunately, no women are allowed to enter the grounds."

"Would that be the case for any visitors?" Nina asked, "or are they just limiting our group? Could someone have taken Lady Tracy inside the monastery?"

Colin gave Nina an amused glance. "Given the right circumstances, there are exceptions to every rule."

"That's true," I mused. "By the way, Lord Colin, this is Lord Graves."

Jason stepped forward to shake his hand. "Pleasure to meet you, sir," he said.

Colin seemed amused. "Do you know Gomi?"

"Excuse me?"

"It is an extraordinary talent you have, sir," Colin replied with a smile. "You've been spending time with Gomi? A bit of advise, however. Disguises are all well and good, but there is a time and a place in which to use them."

"How long before the speaker is here?" I asked to change the subject.

"About four hours," Colin told me. "It will be at the pavilion."

"Is that anywhere near where they were doing the firearms class?"

"On the other side of the courtyard," Colin said.

Nina spoke up. "Do we know the subject of the talk?"

Colin shook his head. "Dr. Ronanda thought that because it was a monastery official, we may be able to gain some insight into the monks by interacting with one of them, getting a feel for what they are as a whole."

"So we're just going to hang out on the grounds for the next four hours?" I asked.

"Yes," he replied, "we can get a bite to eat if you wish."

Jason leaned forward and whispered in my ear. "Do you know if he's human?"

I glanced over my shoulder at him, then studied Colin closer. A Kindred could usually guess if another person was human or Kindred, but it took Auspex to know for sure, a discipline that Jason

didn't have. Colin was definitely human, though, and by his aura he was a genuinely nice guy. I stepped to the side so that Jason was no longer behind me and nodded at him.

He murmured an excuse to the group and pulled me aside. "At higher levels of Obfuscate, one can change things," he hissed at me, still in full Graves mode.

"It's pretty hard to hide your aura. Look, why don't we go outside and chill out, relax," I told him. Then I muttered to myself as I turned away, "Deal with the fact that I get to spend the next few hours with Talon Graves. Just what I wanted to do this week."

Jason caught my arm and spun me around. "Give me back the letter," he said sternly.

I looked up at him, saddened but not really surprised that he was acting exactly as I would expect Graves to. I handed him the note and he put it back in his pocket.

"There is something of a carnival going on in the next courtyard," Dr. Ronanda told the group. "There will be a dinner party and a dance later this evening after the monk's speech."

"Shall we go check out the carnival?" I asked the group.

We walked out of the lab together, but split up on the steps of the building, agreeing to meet in three and a half hours on the edge of the courtyard.

# THE FESTIVAL

Don't speak I know just what you're saying  
So please stop explaining, don't tell me 'cause it hurts  
Don't Speak - No Doubt

I glanced at Jason as we walked toward the festival, leery of seeing Graves every time I looked at him. I'm afraid I was a bit curt with him as we examined the first few booths. I was torn between wanting to touch him to reassure myself that he was really Jason, and wanting to kill him for throwing Graves in my face this way. I knew I wasn't thinking logically, it had after all been my idea for him to do this. I clutched at my computer case and clenched my other fist in my pocket.

"I'm sorry," Jason startled me by saying.

I glanced at his face. "For what?"

"That this guise is disturbing you," he replied.

Jason read my mood well, and gradually he steered me to a section of campus behind an outbuilding where we wouldn't be seen. As we walked, he tried to talk to me about the monk's lecture, but I really wasn't paying attention.

When we were out of sight, he turned to face me. I relaxed a bit as his face settled into the familiar lines of the man I loved.

I sighed and he held his hand out to me. I took it hesitantly, shaking my head and saying, "This isn't going to work, Jason. There is no way I can spend the next three hours with Graves."

"I'm sorry," he said, his rough fingers caressing the palm of my hand. "I know what you're feeling."

I raised an eyebrow at him. "Do you?"

He returned my look with an even one of his own. "Yes."

I looked away. "I'm sorry," I whispered. "I'm pretending to be you pretending to be me, but there's no way I would spend three hours with Graves. There's no way." I met his eye again briefly, then added, "Maybe we should go our separate ways and meet up with everyone else later."

His hand tightened on mine and I looked up at his face. He looked like he wanted to say something, but perhaps he wasn't sure how, or maybe he didn't think that this was the time or place for it. I closed my eyes, sure that he wanted to tell me we should spend time together now because when this was over so were we. I wasn't willing to hear that. If I did, I knew I would be in no shape to help Lena when we found her.

I put my briefcase down and took his other hand in mine. "Hopefully we'll find Lena today, go home, and...."

"Finally be myself," he finished.

I looked away. "Anything's better than Graves."

"Would it be easier for you if I was somebody else?" he asked me. "Someone at random? The crone is looking for Talon, but if he sees him come in.... Maybe it would be better if he saw just a bunch of people come in."

I wanted so badly to agree with him, but I forced myself to shake my head. "Graves can't look like anyone else," I reminded him, "you can. It would be best if you stayed in his guise and we just went our separate ways until the lecture."

He stared into my eyes intently as if he were trying to read my soul. "If you were the crone, would you be looking for Jason Kline, or Talon Graves?"

"I wouldn't be looking for you, because I would know you could be anyone. I would be looking for a big blond son-of-a-bitch." I smiled sadly. "You're too good of an actor not to behave like I would with Graves."

He squeezed my hands tightly. "Yeah, but it's hard to act like Graves and see you react to me like this."

My heart ached for his compassion, but I couldn't help wishing it were more. "That's why we should split up," I told him. I struggled to keep my voice and my face calm.

"When this is over," he said softly, "I think there's something that you and I have to talk about."

My stomach tightened painfully as I remembered standing on the street in San Francisco and hearing Jason tell me I'd get over loving him. I knew I'd have to hear him tell me goodbye sometime, but when we returned to our world would be soon enough for me. "I agree," I whispered.

"If I make it through this," he added.

My eyes narrowed. "Do you think you're not going to?" I asked.

He shrugged. "I don't know," he replied. "I just don't know what he has in store."

I knew he was referring to Lord Malcolm and I gave him a hard smile. "He's gonna die, that's what he has in store," I bit out harshly. "One way or the other."

"What I don't understand is why," Jason muttered as he looked off into the distance.

"Graves," I stated coolly.

"What does he have that the crone wants?"

"You know him better than most people do," I reminded him.

He nodded. "I probably know him better than anyone."

I smiled thinly. "I don't know him that well, and I could see where someone would want to kill him."

Jason returned my smile. "He does have his...."

"Moments?" I suggested caustically. "Attitude? Enemies?"

He nodded. "I could continue."

"Yeah," I agreed, even as I wondered what Jason saw in the Gangrel that he could possibly like. I didn't ask, not willing to put myself through that pain just yet. "Anyway, I think we should split up now and meet up with everyone when we arranged to."

"Okay," he said. I could tell he didn't like it, but I didn't like it much either.

I couldn't stop myself from giving him a brief hug, and to my surprise, he kissed my cheek.

"You go ahead," he said softly, "I'll wait."

"Okay," I whispered. I hesitated, then returned a kiss to his cheek. I pulled away, and his hand lingered on mine until our fingertips parted. I picked up my briefcase and turned to go, casting glances over my shoulder at him until he was out of sight.

As I approached the main campus, I kept thinking about the blood samples in Dr. Ronanda's lab. I didn't feel it was a good idea to leave them behind, so I decided to see if she would give them to me. I found her hunched over a blood sample and cleared my throat.

"Doctor," I asked her when she looked up, "would it be possible for me to take the blood samples that Lord Malcolm gave you? You should know that they were taken from the subject against his will, I'm sure he wouldn't like Malcolm to gain anything from his affliction."

"Of course, Lady Christina," she said.

I followed her to the refrigerator and she took out the blood samples. I asked if she had something small to store them in, and she gave me a small refrigerated container. I put the blood into the container and then into my briefcase. I thanked her and took my leave.

# A NEW FRIEND

Drink your tequila, give me some time  
To unlearn all I've learned, for the spring to unwind  
The Sky is a Poisonous Garden - Concrete Blonde

I spent some time checking out the fair, different displays and such, never having been to a fair that I could remember. This was some type of science fair, and nearly everything was new and different for me. Some of the lectures were interesting, so I stopped here and there to listen.

There seemed to be people from many ducal divisions milling about, but most were from Inferno. They were friendly but not intrusive, so that even in the crowd of people, I felt alone. It suited my mood.

I stood and listened to a lecture on the weather control devices for a few minutes. I had set my briefcase between my feet and was playing with the ring, my mind only half on the lecture. Suddenly I felt arms go around my waist loosely, strong hands coming to rest on my stomach. I didn't feel restrained in any way, merely held, almost lovingly.

Before I could do more than stiffen, I felt a soft kiss on my temple and heard a deep voice say in my ear, "I'm not trying to hurt you, please help me."

I looked down to see tanned male hands and a white long sleeve shirt with the sleeves rolled up. Despite the distinct smell of gunpowder, my instincts told me I wasn't in danger.

"This chick won't leave me alone, please just play along," the voice added.

I slowly turned my head to look up at the man standing behind me, an amused look on my face. It was the man I had seen earlier helping with the firearm exhibition. He gave me a toothy grin, and because his body was pressed up against the length of my back, I felt the outline of a gun strapped to his thigh under the kilt.

"That's the most inventive pick up line I've ever heard," I told him. Something about this guy made me like him instantly, almost as if I recognized a kindred spirit. That in itself was strange, because normally I was skeptical of everyone I met until they proved themselves to me.

"She's really annoying," he confided.

I smiled and laughed, for the moment willing to play along. "Okay, where is she?"

"She's behind me."

He moved around to my front and pulled me close to him. I noticed a leather strap on his shoulder from a duffel bag he had slung on his back.

He glanced over my head and said loudly, "Sorry to have made you wait dear." He bent and kissed my cheek.

"Is she that close?" I whispered in his ear.

"Yes," he breathed.

I put my hand on his shoulder and give him a brief hug "You know I would wait forever for you, darling," I said in a carrying voice. I was glad that I couldn't see Jason anywhere in the crowd; regardless of what I believed would happen when we returned to our world, I didn't want him to see me in another man's arms.

He looked over my head and smiled at someone behind me. "Seline, it is good to see you, did you enjoy the lecture?" He kept an arm around my back as I turned to look, and rested the other hand on my hip. He was a bit too familiar with me for my tastes, but a part of me welcomed the physical contact; I had grown used to it when I was with Luke, and this stranger was a very attractive man. I told myself I was merely acting, but I didn't believe it.

A young woman stood there, glaring at me. Her dark hair was pulled up to the crown of her head in a bun, and her brown eyes looked at me speculatively. "Frasier," she purred, "I had no idea that you were involved with someone."

I smiled at her in the way that women do when they've won the man. Her smile told me that the battle wasn't yet over by any means.

"Dr. Caltraz told me that I could get with you in hopes of learning exactly what the velocity does to the bullet upon impact based on the projected trajectory," she said to Frasier.

He nodded along with her words as if he barely understood them, then looked down at me.

"Well, you'll just have to get with him later," I told her. "He promised to spend the afternoon with me."

Her eyes burned into mine, but I was more amused than threatened. After all, she had no idea what I was, and I would be leaving her world as soon as we found Lena.

"How rude," she sputtered, then stalked away with one a final backward glance at us over her shoulder.

I laughed, thinking that it had been one of the strangest days in my life. When she disappeared into the crowd, I tried to step away from Frasier, but he tightened his grip and scanned the crowd.

"I think she's gone," I said softly.

He looked around again. "I don't know, she's pretty sneaky."

Again I tried to move away and when he allowed it I was relieved that I wouldn't have to push the issue. He adjusted the bag on his shoulder and looked down at me. "Thank you, you're a life saver."

I shook my head and looked away. "Well, that would be a first," I muttered, thinking of Jason.

"What do you mean?" he asked. "You seem like a nice enough girl."

"Yeah," I said with a smile, "but I'm not real good at saving lives."

"No, no, trust me, you don't know what that she-devil was about." He seemed nervous and scanned the crowd for her again.

"She-devil, huh," I chuckled.

"Oh, yeah," he replied, a wary look on his face.

I nodded. "She did have the look of daddy's money about her," I commented, then remembered where we were. "Or mommy's money."

"Yeah," he agreed. "So, are you from Inferno?"

"No."

"Um, well, my name is Frasier O'Connell." He stuck his hand out.

I shook his hand. "Christina Strong."

He released my hand slowly. "Where ya from?"

I didn't think he would believe me if I told him. "Just lately? Mopenos."

"Oh, Mopenos," he murmured, nodding. "Like the rest of this place, totally boring."

I found Frasier very amusing; he was lightening my mood somehow despite my worries. "The rest of this place?" I asked. "And where are you from?"

He grinned again, apparently a common facial expression for him. "Born and bred right here in Inferno. I spent a good part of my after school years doing that whole crazy monk thing, but you know—"

I studied him closely as a light bulb went off in my head. "Crazy monk thing?"

He nodded. "Oh, yeah. I let my mother talk me into it," he told me. "She thought that I needed direction."

"Would that be the Brotherhood of Eternal Love or something?" I asked, trying for a nonchalant tone.

"Everlasting Peace," he replied. "Can I interest you in a bit of refreshment?"

Wild horses couldn't have kept me from agreeing. "Yeah, I believe so." I picked up my briefcase and hooked my arm through his. "So tell me about the monastery, I hear it's quite close. Is it big, is it well guarded, are there women there?"

He looked down at me as he led me toward a booth across the square. "How do you know about the monastery?"

I decided honesty was the best policy. "I'm looking to save a life and the trail is leading there."

"You just did," he replied with a wry smile.

"No, no," I said softly. "A close friend, close enough to be a sister to me."

"Oh, really?" Something in his manner told me he knew who I was talking about.

"She's in trouble and I need to find her," I told him sincerely.

"You wouldn't happen to be talking about a redhead would you?" he asked.

I smiled. "Frasier, I knew there was a reason I liked you. Yeah, she a redhead."

"Well," he began, but seemed reluctant to continue.

"Let me guess," I drawled, "hangs with Lord Malcolm."

He nodded. "That guy is spooky."

"That guy's gotta die," I muttered under my breath.

Frasier glanced at my face in surprise. "You sound pretty tough, you know." He pulled his arm from mine and threw it around my shoulders companionably. "I like you. Let's go get a beer."

"Let's go get a beer," I agreed.

We entered the booth, which was nearly empty. We went to the bar and sat down on two of the stools there. Frasier threw his bag to the floor at his feet, and I set mine down more gently between the bar and my feet, taking care to keep in physical contact with it at all times.

"Hey, Frankie," he called to the bartender. "A couple of beers."

"Hi, Frasier," the big man replied, "how ya' doing?"

Frasier rested his forearms on the bar. "I just had that lecture with Dr. Caltraz," he told the man.

"Oh yeah, how'd it go?"

"It was cool," he said with a meaningful glance at me. "It was really cool."

I covered my smile with my hand and looked away. The bartender sat two beers on the bar in front of us. Frasier gave him a few coins for them then picked his up and took a long drink. I took a small sip of mine and sat it back down on the bar.

"So why does a man's man like you need a stranger to ditch a chick," I asked him. "Isn't there someone you know that would have done the trick?"

He shrugged. "You don't know the women around here, they're pretty forceful."

"Forceful," I repeated slowly.

"They think they own every—" He stopped and seemed to remember what the ducal division was like. "Wait a minute, they do own everything."

I couldn't contain my laughter. "So you're not looking for a girl who owns everything."

"No, no," he told me. "You know, I'm the man."

I leaned closer to him and whispered, "Is that why you wear a gun strapped to your thigh?"

A sheepish look swept over his face. "Well," he said, lowering his voice and acting as if he was telling a big secret, "I keep the gun there because sometimes, just sometimes, if the wind is blowing just right, sometimes it looks cool."

I had to laugh. He straightened and drank down the rest of his beer, then he called for another.

"So tell me about the redhead," I encouraged. "How's her health? When was the last time you saw her?"

He shot me a captivated look. "You're just full of questions, aren't ya?" He gestured toward my drink. "You've only had a sip. Come on, what are ya, a wimp?"

"Oh, I don't think I'm a wimp," I told him with a grin.

He chuckled. "I didn't either, so let's go."

"I could probably out drink you," I told him.

"Them's not the words to be saying to me, lassie," he warned, grinning.

"Well, you know," I grinned back at him, "alcohol doesn't seem to affect me at all."

"Me either," he bragged, "I can drink it all."

I laughed. "Let's not get into a pissing contest, okay?" I wanted him cooperative, not drunk.

"No," he said, "because I know I can shoot straight." He gave a pointed look down my bodice and I covered it with my hand and gave him an amused chastising look.

"Tell me about the redhead," I reminded him.

"The redhead," he murmured. He took another drink of his beer. "Yeah, she was a nice lady. I haven't seen her in a while; I left the order about five months ago. In fact, it was because of her that I left."

"Why?"

He shrugged. "I had a difference of opinion with the rest of the monks and I was asked to leave. Although I knew before then that I was reaching a point where the monastery was something I didn't want to be involved with."

I grew concerned. "What, was she being hurt in some way? Held against her will?"

He shot me a probing look. "She like a friend of yours or something?"

"She's like a sister to me," I told him.

"When was the last time you saw her?" he asked me.

"Two years ago." At his raised eyebrows, I explained, "It's a long story. I've talked to her, though. Her betrothed called me to tell me she was missing."

He nodded. "I'd wondered."

"Why?"

"I heard bits and pieces of conversations," he said, "but I didn't know for sure that she was involved in some way."

"What happened to make you leave the order?" I asked bluntly. "You didn't like the color of her hair?"

"It was her presence there," he replied, looking down into his drink.

"In the monastery?"

"Yeah."

When he fell silent, I asked, "So is Lord Malcolm staying at the monastery?"

"He comes and goes," Frasier told me. "He checks up on them at least once a month."

I gripped the edge of the bar in anticipation. "Gee, I hope it's that time of the month."

"So how do you know Malcolm?" he asked, noting my movements. "Do you know him through the lady?"

I shook my head. "He hurt a friend of mine." I took a drink of the beer, concentrating to stop the fine trembling of my hand.

"He seems the type," Frasier agreed. "He also seems like someone you don't want to mess with."

"Oh, I plan to mess with him," I stated frankly. "I plan to mess his whole world up. So does Jason."

He studied my face. "Who's Jason?"

"The gentleman you saw me with earlier," I replied. "He's the friend of mine that Malcolm hurt."

"The long haired punk?" Frasier asked.

I chuckled. "Let's just call that a disguise. He's actually quite capable, one of the most capable men that I've ever met," I told him, then muttered, "unless it's dealing with stuff." I lifted my glass and took a long drink.

"Take a longer one," he suggested. "You look like you need it."

Obligingly, I lifted the glass to finish it. When he saw what I intended, Frasier also lifted his. We set our glasses down at the same time, both wiping our mouths.

"So," I said softly, "defenses at the monastery, layout, secret entrances, passwords..."

"None of the above," he said firmly.

I gave him a steady look. "You owe me Frasier. Can you get my friends and me inside?" When he hesitated, I urged, "Come one, it wouldn't be boring."

"I could take your male friends in," he told me, "but I can't violate the ways of the monastery."

I might have found his integrity charming if it hadn't stood in my way. "The ways of the monastery have already been violated," I reminded him. "What's two more women?"

"Two?" he asked in surprise. "I could go with you and try to mediate something so that you could get in but I can't just bust you in. Even though I'm not part of the order, I can't do that. It's a matter of principle. I can mediate for you, but I can't violate the order."

"Can't bring in two, huh?" I shrugged. "Well, Nina's going to be pissed. Are you sure you can't draw me layout, give me the height of the walls?"

He grinned at my tenacity. "I'll take you there."

I settled with that for the moment, knowing that I'd work on it later. "You say you've lived here your whole life. Are you a teacher here at the college?"

"I'm just helping out Dr. Caltraz," he told me. "I'm actually between jobs right now."

"Between jobs. What did you do at your last job?"

"I threw things," he replied vaguely.

"Threw things?"

"You know," he said, making battle motions. "I shot things, hit things."

"Were you in some type of army?"

"Yeah, I guess you could call it that," he mused. "It was an historical dig, and I was the guard." He kicked the bag at his feet. "Tools of the trade."

I looked down at my case and thought of the weapons concealed inside. "I know what you mean."

"Do you want another beer?" he asked, motioning for the bartender.

"I am kind of thirsty," I admitted. I looked at his throat, knowing that beer wasn't what I was thirsty for.

The bartender brought us another round and we talked about Frasier's childhood. He had been a rambunctious child, by his own account, never really fitting in anywhere. His father had died when he was young, and his mother now lived with his older sister.

"Mom pressured me to join the monastery when I was eighteen," he told me. "She wanted me to be educated." She had apparently also wanted him to be like his older brother who had been killed in a mill accident a few years ago.

While we spoke, he never once mentioned Lena's name, or referred to her as Lady Tracy. He told me that he still held the beliefs he'd learned at the monastery, but that he thought there was something more for him in life than that.

He spoke of weapons with a great passion and, listening to him, I realized that despite his near constant joking, he was very intelligent. He slipped into other languages sometimes, most of which I didn't recognize.

At some point during our conversation, I realized that I instinctively trusted Frasier. I didn't understand that because I usually didn't trust anyone right away. On the other hand, I always trust my instincts. I wished there were someone like him in my world that I could count on when we returned and Jason went back to California.

Frasier casually mentioned that Malcolm had the entire Brotherhood brainwashed.

"Does he have Lady Tracy brainwashed?" I asked, frowning.

"I don't know," he replied. "I made it a point not to spend too much time with her. I didn't approve of her being there."

He didn't know what kind of relationship Lena had with Malcolm, but he didn't think it was a close one. He recalled an evening that there had been turmoil in the back garden, and hour later he'd thought he heard a woman crying. He believed she had been trying to escape.

I gripped the glass tightly, glad that he was looking straight ahead and didn't notice the whiteness of my knuckles. I realized that he was almost indifferent toward Lena, but then he didn't know her like I did. She simply didn't mean anything to him.

"What about your life?" he asked.

I glanced at his face. "I was in an accident about seven years ago," I told him with a shrug. "I don't remember anything before then."

"What happened?"

"It was a carriage accident," I lied. "I fell."

He seemed puzzled. "Why haven't you had a probe done to recover your memory?"

"A probe? Like a mind probe?" Could they have a cure for amnesia here?

He nodded. "I've heard some people at the institute talking about a clinic in the remote part of Inferno where they have an experimental treatment to recover memory," he said. "I don't understand it, but I've heard it has worked, even in some cases of long term memory loss."

I shook my head, dismissing the idea. If it was in a remote part of Inferno, I knew we wouldn't have time for me to investigate, and I wasn't too sure about having a mind probe done in a world where my kind didn't exist.

"I know where I was born, that I have a brother and my mother died when I was young," I stated, returning to my tale. "I know that I went to college and that after the accident my life changed. I didn't know more than my first name for years. Then I met Jason and learned some

things about my past from him, but that relationship didn't work out, basically because of Malcolm." I grimaced when I heard the tremor in my voice.

Frasier took my hand, encouraging me to go on. "Would that be the gentleman that you're here with?" The calluses on his fingers reminded me of Jason.

"Yeah, that's him."

"And, do you love this man?" he asked, his fingers tightening on mine.

I looked away and lied. "I thought I did at one time. I don't know what I feel about him anymore. It's been so long and he dumped me on the street in the middle of the night—" my voice broke and I took a sip of my beer.

Frasier pulled my hand from the bar onto his leg where he held it, rubbing my skin with his thumb. I found the gesture very comforting.

"I got into a relationship with a friend who helped me look for Jason, but that didn't work out, basically because of Jason." I sighed. "So I guess I'm footloose and fancy free at this point in my life."

His hand cupped my chin and turned my face to look at him. "It sounds like you need someone stable in your life, someone to take care of you and let you be your own person."

"Maybe," I allowed.

"Somebody like me." He leaned forward to kiss me, but I pulled away before his lips touched mine.

"Frasier," I protested, "you don't know me, you don't know anything about me."

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

"I appreciate the sentiment and everything, but I'm not from here," I told him honestly. "I lead a very different life."

"Hey," he grinned, "I'm willing to relocate."

"I don't think you understand," I told him firmly, pulling my hand away. "I'm not from here."

He shrugged. "Okay, I'm up for adventure."

I shook my head. "No. You see this ring?" I held up my hand and pointed to the ring Robert had slid on my finger.

"Yeah."

"I take this ring off, a big portal opens, I step through, and I'm in another world. I'm not from here," I repeated.

He seemed intrigued. "Cool."

"Well it's not all cool because in that other world I live at night," I confessed. "That's my world. Danger and darkness and magic and... that's my world."

He counted my warnings off on his fingers. "Danger I can deal with. Darkness, hey, its not like we got the sun going on here. Magic, I haven't been around it too much, but whatever. Do you need like a bodyguard or something?"

I blinked at him. "Well, when I'm asleep during the day I'm pretty much dead to the world," I admitted.

"Oh, you're a heavy sleeper."

"You could put it that way."

"I can see where that could prove to be a problem," he said. "You got a lot of enemies? I like lots of enemies."

I looked at him in astonishment, unable to believe he was being serious. I studied his aura trying to decide exactly how serious he was. It was easy to see that he was idealistic, compassionate, and conservative, but there were signs in the glow around him that both my words and myself excited him.

"I don't think you understand," I repeated warningly. "See, I'm not like you."

He spread his legs on the stool and looked down, then up at me with a sheepish grin. "I hope not."

"No, you really don't understand," I insisted. "There isn't anyone in your world that is like me."

He nodded. "You're right."

"Or my friends."

"Ok," he said with a shrug. "Whatever."

I couldn't believe he was serious, he had no idea what it would be like for him. The only way he could come back to our world with us would be as a ghoul, my ghoul. Suddenly the thought intrigued me; Brenda's Rafe seemed to be was helping her get over Michael. Maybe if I had Frasier, I wouldn't be so tempted to return to Vegas and Luke. Maybe if he were with me, I wouldn't hear the sunrise calling to me when Jason left.

"If you went with me you would have to adore me," I warned, trying to discourage him. "There would be no choice."

"Hey," he said, kicking the bag again, "at this point in my life, I don't need anything but the next fight."

"How do you feel about blood, Frasier?" I asked to see if he shocked easily.

He didn't. "Lost a little here, lost a lot there. It's red. It's warm," He said with a shrug.

"Does the sight make you sick?"

"No," he replied. "I've pulled enough bullets out and sewn up other people and myself enough that it doesn't bother me."

I knew there was no way I could take him into my world without telling him as much as I could and letting him make an informed decision. I did need someone to watch over me, and if he were my ghoul, I would be the one in control of the relationship. I would be the Domitor, the master.

I reached up, smoothed the hair at his temple back and leaned forward to whisper in his ear. "What about drinking it?" I straightened and watched his face for a reaction.

He grinned. "Well, aren't you a kinky one."

"You have no idea," I told him seriously.

I studied his face carefully. "You're honestly willing to give up your entire world, your family your friends, whatever loved ones that you have here, and walk through a portal with me to some world that is completely different from this one."

"Its not like I'm ending hunger, or saving the world or bringing the sun back," he told me.

I smiled. "But you'd get to see the sun, actually."

That certainly piqued his interest and he sobered instantly. "Really?"

"I wouldn't see it with you," I told him, "but you could see it."

He studied my face. "You're serious?"

I nodded. "Sunlight's not good for my complexion."

"I could really see the sun?" he asked.

"Really." I had to grin at his child-like enthusiasm.

"Sign me up." He seemed so sure, but there was still too much he didn't know.

"There are prices to pay, you know. You can't just walk into this blind." I glanced around, knowing that this wasn't the place for what I needed to tell him. "Is there somewhere we could go that is a little more private?"

He nodded. "We can take a walk if you want."

I stood. "Let's take a walk." I grabbed my briefcase and he offered his arm to me. I took it and glanced around again, looking for Jason. He was still nowhere to be seen.

# EXCHANGE OF BLOOD

All my life has been a journey, here to you  
Every road and river brought me closer to the touch  
The Touch - Ricky Martin

Frasier and I walked across the campus to what he told me was a jogging trail. It was mostly deserted, and as we went I explained my life to him.

"Okay," I began, "in the society I live in there are clans. Do you have clans here?"

"Clans, yeah," he said. "Clan McDougal, Clan McBride..."

"I'm Clan Tremere. I know that means nothing to you but Tremere study magic," I explained. "We are pretty clannish, and we stick to each other against all other clans."

"Like I said, I haven't been around magic too much. Can I clean my gun still?" He was like a little kid when it came to firearms.

I was getting used to his wise cracks and I smiled. "Actually you could probably clean mine." God knows they needed it.

"Ok," he said. "I like guns."

"I'm moving to a new city and I hear there's trouble there. Liking guns could be beneficial," I commented. "Although we'd probably have to get you some new ammunition, regular bullets don't work well on my kind."

"What are we talking here?" he asked with interest.

I looked up at him. He was at least five inches taller than I was, three inches taller than Jason was. "Do you have phosphorous rounds here?"

"What's that?"

"The kind that explode on impact," I explained. "They burn, even under water."

"Like a grenade?" he asked. "In a gun?"

"Yeah," I told him, "in the bullet."

His smile was distracted. "I could add two more guns in the space I have grenades in."

I shook my head in amazement. "I'm just not sure what else to say to get you to understand the danger of my world."

"So what exactly are you? You're human, right?" He grinned down at me as if he were joking.

I wasn't. "No, I'm Kindred."

He frowned. "Okay, is that like a special kind of human?"

"It's more than that," I told him. "I was human, but remember the accident I told you about?"

"Yeah," he said.

"Well, it wasn't a carriage accident," I admitted. "I slipped and fell on a set of fangs."

He blinked in surprise. "Fangs, like a dog?"

I looked around to make sure we were alone, then stopped and let my fangs elongate in my mouth. "Fangs like this," I said as I bared them.

He stared at them for a moment, then reached out to touch them carefully. "Whoa!"

"They're real," I assured him.

"What do you do with them?"

I smiled, the white canines showing plainly against my lips. "Did I mention I bite?"

"Really," he murmured as if thinking about it. "Hard?"

I shook my head. "It wouldn't hurt, not you anyway."

He looked at my teeth again, then demanded, "Show me."

"No," I said, taken aback at his complete lack of fear, "come on, you just—you guys don't even have vampires in this world, you have no concept of what it would be like."

"Show me," he insisted in all seriousness. "I'm tough, I can take it."

It was so tempting; I'd been drinking from cold blood bags since before Luke pulled his disappearing act. Frasier held his arm up and that decided me. I reached out and took his arm, turning it to reveal the sensitive skin of his wrist. He looked down at me questioningly.

"It's easier to reach the vein this way," I said self-consciously. It had been a while since I fed from a mortal who watched what I was doing.

His watched me in expectation, and I could read the excitement in his body.

"Are you sure about this?" I asked him, only half in jest. "Because, you know if you freak out I'll have to kill you."

He didn't believe I was serious. "You can try," he told me with a cocky grin.

I met his gaze with an even look of my own. When his grin faded, I knew that he saw the sincerity in my face and believed me. Still, he showed no fear.

Looking into his eyes, I raised his wrist to my mouth. Slowly I sank my fangs into his skin and hot sweet blood flooded my mouth. I closed my eyes as the wonder and taste of it washed over me. He swayed on his feet and dropped his bag to the ground. I put an arm around his waist to support him and drank deeply.

After a short time, too short for me to be satisfied, I retracted my fangs and pulled his arm away. I made sure that he saw the blood on his wrist but he didn't seem concerned at the sight. He shivered when I licked the wound closed, and I let out a low laugh at his reaction. When I was sure he could stand, I released him, still watching his face.

"That was cool," he said in a husky voice. "Would I do that?"

"Not exactly," I told him. I felt a little dizzy and didn't understand why until I remembered the alcohol he had consumed earlier.

"Think of all the neat things I could do with those," he murmured, staring at my mouth.

"If you came with me you'd have to swear to serve me for life," I warned him.

His grin returned. "I don't think I'd have a problem with that."

I shook my head in amazement. "Nothing fazes you, does it? Nothing takes you aback?"

"I've been through a lot of shit, man," he told me.

"You have no idea," I admonished him.

He shrugged. "I'm bored."

"I can guarantee you'd never be bored," I said softly. "Over worked, maybe, stressed out a lot, but you'd never be bored."

I knew that there was one more task that had to be done before I could agree to take him with me. "Here's the other thing," I explained. "I said you'd have to adore me and serve me forever, but I would have to ensure your loyalty to me. That's done through what we call a blood bond."

"A what?" he asked. He moved closer to me, his face very close to mine. "You tie me up with blood? You are kinky."

I smiled. "No, it's a bit more than that. See, the blood of Kindred is cumulative and addicting. When you drink it once you feel a kind of crush toward the Kindred. If you drink twice, its like 'I'm

dating this person and thinking about marriage.' If you drink three times, you love this person to the death and you will never leave them, never harm them. That's what it would have to be, Frasier."

He grinned. "Hmm, can't say as I've ever had that. So, what would that make me to you?" he asked, gesturing toward his wrist where I had drank.

"Human blood doesn't have that effect," I told him with a shake of my head, "and I've had enough of blood bonds, thank you very much. I'm not going there ever again."

He snapped his fingers and looked disappointed.

I shook my head and smiled. "So what do you say, Frasier, you game?"

"Where's the dotted line?" he asked, resolution and eagerness clear both on his face and in his aura.

I remembered what Brenda had told me about sudden sometimes being right. I lifted my wrist and bit open the vein, then held it out to him. "Right here."

He looked fascinated at the blood dripping from my wrist.

"It's just blood, Frasier," I told him. "It's not as warm as yours, but I can guarantee that it tastes better."

To my disappointment, he hesitated too long. I knew that there was no way I could push him into this. I raised the wound toward my mouth to close it but before I could do so, he grabbed my wrist. I watched as he lifted my arm to his mouth and slowly touched the blood with his tongue. He licked the cut and seemed to ponder the taste for a moment, then settled his mouth onto the wound.

I knew the vitae would burn when he swallowed, but it didn't seem to bother him. I could feel him drawing the blood from my body and it brought back memories of Luke feeding from me as we made love. I swayed against Frasier and he pulled me tight against his body.

After a moment, I tried to pull the wrist away from him. "That's enough," I told him. "It wouldn't do to make me weak."

He held the arm to him, still drinking.

I pulled harder. "That's enough," I repeated as he released me. "I have things to do today, I might need this. How are you feeling?"

He let me go and started pacing. "Like I could run from here to Mopenos in an hour," he confessed.

I smiled and licked my wrist closed. "You probably could." I could taste him on my skin.

"I feel like I could read the entire library at the monastery without being tired at all," he said softly.

"It's possible," I replied.

"Definitely retain everything," he continued, "but it's not like I haven't done that already."

"Oh, really?" I asked remembering Luke's phenomenal recall. "You have a photographic memory?"

"I don't know," he murmured, "the monks always said I was a fast learner."

I chuckled. "Funny, I was always told that too. I picked up Russian in a week."

"I don't know Russian yet," he admitted, "but I picked up Egyptian in a half hour."

"Maybe I could teach you Russian," I offered, "and you could teach me Latin."

"Oh, yeah." He stopped pacing and looked back at me, almost as if for the first time.

"It's something I haven't picked up," I confessed, "which is really amazing because most of the Tremere rituals are in Latin." I looked at my watch; it was nearly time to meet the others. I had to tell him about them before we joined them. "So, I know you don't have any Kindred here, but do you have any werewolves and werebeasts in this world?"

"Shh," he said quickly with a glance around us.

I looked around too, but there was no one near us. "Okay, I take it it's a bad thing."

"You can take it that it's a dead thing to be that," he told me as he stepped closer.

I shrugged. "Okay, well, obviously you know some of the secrets about me and my friends. You're going to have to keep all of them to yourself along with whatever else you might learn when you're with us. Although I can't say that I would kill you, any of them would. And if you don't think they could, then you don't know my friends." Of course, he didn't know my friends, but somehow I seemed to be rambling.

"I can keep secrets," he said softly, reaching up and touching my face with a grin. "There's just a small price."

I returned his grin. "What would that be?"

He lowered his head to kiss me and for reasons I didn't understand I just watched him, made no move to back away. His lips were warm and soft, much like what I remembered Jason's lips to be like before his embrace. He touched my mouth with his tongue and despite a voice telling me to stop him, I opened my lips and met his tongue with my own.

His arms came up around me and pulled me closer to him until our bodies were pressed together from knee to chest. I quickly lost myself in the kiss, forgetting everything, even Lena and Jason. It had been so long since I had been this close to Luke, and I missed the physical relationship we had shared. Frasier's feeding and the alcohol from his blood had roused feelings in me that I had a hard time controlling.

I felt his hand move over the gun at my back and he smiled against my mouth. He patted the weapon, then ran his hand down across my buttock. That was enough to bring me to my senses. When I realized that my hands were on his shoulders, I pushed at them to get some distance between us.

"This is not the time or the place," I breathed, almost feeling as if I was drunk. "I'm not sure there will be a time and a place for this, but it's not like we don't have forever to find out."

He smiled. "We have time," he told me in that husky voice, "until I get stupid."

"You get stupid, you get killed," I warned him.

"Exactly," he replied. "Which I don't intend to do for a very long time, this is too cool." He rested his forehead against mine and it reminded me so much of Luke that I swayed against him.

"Well, see the upside about being with me is that you never grow old and you never die," I said, then added, "unless you do something stupid. You won't die of old age, or disease."

He muttered something in a language I didn't understand, but I nodded anyway.

"Call it a perk," I told him.

He moved his hands to my waist and grinned down at me. "I think I'm gonna like this."

"It's kind of a permanent thing," I warned him, "so if you don't like it there's no way to back out. This is probably your last opportunity to do so."

He shook his head. "Not a chance."

I took a step back from the passion in his gaze. "It's almost time for the lecture," I said quickly. "The guy from the monastery, do you know him?"

"Yeah," he nodded. "Father Elliot. He's the head there."

"Well my friends and I would like to talk him," I told him. "See if we can get into the monastery and find out about Lady Tracy."

"I'll do what I can," he promised.

"Do you think he'll admit she's there?" I asked. "Should we not mention her? Should we just pretend interest in visiting the monastery?"

"Good idea," he said. "He'd probably be pretty receptive to the men going in, but he's definitely not going to allow women inside."

I shook my head to clear the haziness I felt. "Ok, before I forget there's one more thing. Due to various circumstances, Malcolm is expecting Jason and Jason's friend Graves. To come to the monastery," I added.

Frasier frowned. "Who the hell would name a child after a place where you put the dead?"

"It's a last name," I laughed. "His name is Talon Graves, so claw, dead people." I pondered that thought for a moment. "I'd like put a claw in him and make him dead, but we'll not go there, okay? Anyway, you remember my friend Jason? I told you he was in a disguise; he now looks like this guy Talon Graves. He's got some magic going on."

He shook his head. "Look, you just tell me who's friend and who's foe, and I'll protect you from both."

"He's Graves, and I'm Jason," I told him, not commenting on his statement. "'Cause Jason can look like anybody, and we needed somebody to be Jason. So, I'm Jason, no touchy-feely. 'Cause I'm a guy, unless you go in for that type of thing." I couldn't understand why I suddenly felt the need to ramble on.

A strange look passed over his face. "No? Okay." I picked up my briefcase and he immediately took it from me, then picked up his bag. We turned and walked back toward the festival.

"The dark haired girl I was with is Nina," I told him as we walked. "She's of my clan. The blond guy is Cormac, he's also of my clan."

"So you're like all related?" he asked.

"It's a blood thing," I said. "Jason is not of our clan."

"Wait," he stopped and turned to look down at me intently. "Can I still drink beer?"

I laughed. "Oh, yeah," I replied, "and whenever you have a beer and I drink from you, then I have a beer. Cause the beer I drink don't do shit for me, I just have to throw it up later anyway."

He looked disgusted. "That's abuse," he exclaimed.

I shrugged. "Down side of being Kindred. I can eat, but I have to purge it before I go to sleep for the day." I looked up to see him grinning indulgently down at me.

"What?" I demanded with a frown.

"What?"

"What? What's with the wacky grin?"

He laughed. "You're feeling a little tipsy aren't you?" he asked.

I laughed. "I don't remember the last time I've fed from anyone who'd been drinking." Suddenly I sobered and looked around me. "I really have to get a hold of myself, I don't want Jason to see me drunk," I murmured under my breath shaking my head.

"Anyway," I continued, "Jason is not of our clan. He's kindred but he's Nosferatu. You know the disguise thing? He's really ugly." I thought about what he really looked like, considering. "Ok, well, he's not that bad. He's really not that bad, but most of his clan are."

Frasier threw his arm around my shoulders and pulled me against his side. "It's all right," he told me, "you don't need him anymore."

"Yeah, ri-ight," I said, looking up at him in disbelief. I would never not need Jason.

"So, then there's the guy in the black outfit," I continued. "He's a priest actually, of a religion in our world. Jason used to be a priest until this whole thing took him from God's light, but we won't go there. The priest is something I won't mention cause it's a bad thing. The blond chick knows him but she also has amnesia so she doesn't remember him. She's from our world but she's lived here a while. Violeta?" I thought that was the name she was using.

"I know her," he replied, a bit surprised. "She's from your world?"

"Yeah," I said. "She's from our world so she'll be going back with us."

By this time, we were approaching the crowds again, and Frasier let his arm drop from my shoulders. We fell silent as we walked through the fair, and he continued to walk quite close to me. After a few minutes I saw everyone gathered under a tree and led Frasier toward them.

# PLANS

Wild when the waves start to break  
And God knows they're breaking in me now  
Wild - Poe

I felt Frasier's hand in the small of my back and looked up at him. "We've talked about this," I reminded him firmly.

He moved his hand as if burned and grinned sheepishly down at me. "Oh, yeah, forgot."

I stiffened when I saw Jason looking so much like Talon Graves, but he just looked from me to Frasier and my briefcase then looked away.

"'Jason,'" the Graves look alike said as I walked up to the group. Then he motioned as if he was correcting himself. "Christina," he said.

I nodded coolly to him. "Graves." I turned to the group and said, "Guys, this is Frasier O'Connell. Frasier, this is Nina Rodriguez, a friend of mine."

"Frasier," Nina said, offering him her hand.

Frasier took it and kissed the back of it lightly. "Nice to meet you," he murmured.

"Cormac," I continued.

Frasier shook Cormac's hand.

"I believe you know Violeta," I murmured.

He took her hand and kissed it. "Good to see you again."

"You as well," she replied.

"And Lord Colin," I commented.

"Lord Colin," Frasier said respectfully with a bow of his head.

"O'Connell," he acknowledged. "It is nice to see you again."

I turned to Jason. "Graves, this is Frasier O'Connell. Frasier, this is Talon Graves."

Frasier shot me a questioning look that I gave a slight nod to. He shook Jason's hand briskly. "It is a pleasure to meet you, sir," he told Jason.

"And this," I told Frasier, "is Brother Stephen Brennan. Brother, I think you have something in common with Frasier, he was a member of the monastery for some time."

Stephen bowed to Frasier, who bowed deferentially in return.

"How do you do, Brother?" Frasier asked.

"I am well, thank you," Stephen replied.

"How do you find this fair land?" Frasier inquired.

Stephen smiled. "It is passing wondrous."

"Yes, men of our breed are few and far between," Frasier grinned.

I rolled my eyes. "Not in this crowd," I murmured with a glance at Jason.

"I have spoken with... your colleague," Frasier said with a glance at me. "She has told me of the reason for your visit to Inferno. I was able to tell her that your friend is indeed at the monastery."

I met Jason's eye and smiled with hope. He nodded in reply.

"I left the order soon after her arrival," Frasier continued, "because I did not agree with her presence on the grounds. Our beliefs are such that while we do welcome women into the religion, the grounds of the monastery are supposed to be male only, a place of healing and solace."

I shook my head at the thought of all those men alone without a woman to brighten their world. I knew I would never be so narrow-minded as to cut myself off from the opposite sex, they were far too amusing, among other things.

"I have told her that I will aid you in whatever way I can as a go between the monks and yourselves. I understand that Brother Gregory is going to be here soon," Frasier added as he gestured toward the area set up for the lecture. "I will introduce you to him and we'll see where that leads."

"Frasier did say that it would be best if we don't mention Lena at all," I told them. "We will just express interest at seeing the grounds."

Everyone nodded in agreement, and Jason turned to me.

"Do you have the vials?" he asked me in an undertone.

I looked at him in surprise. "The ones that Dr. Ronanda had?"

"Yes."

"Yes," I answered honestly.

He looked disgruntled. "I was going to have her run a few tests on them."

"I didn't think it would be a good idea to leave them there given what they were," I frowned and told him.

Jason glanced at the others. "I understand that, but if he was looking for a substance to inject someone with to make it happen," I knew he was talking about vampirism, "maybe she could find a substance to inject someone with to make it not happen."

I gave him an even look. "That's not what we're here for," I reminded him.

"No," he admitted, "but it's always good to have something going on the side."

Now he just sounded too much like Graves. "Are you planing on coming back here sometime soon?" I asked.

"I hope so," he replied.

For a moment I stared at him in surprise, then I turned to Frasier. "Isn't the lecture supposed to start soon?"

"I believe so, yes," he said. "Should we be off?"

"Sure," I told him, turning toward the lecture area. "Maybe we can catch him before he goes on."

As the others followed me, I heard Jason speak to Frasier.

"I was told that you have a book with a description of the entity you worship," he stated.

I slowed and waited for Frasier and Jason to catch up to me.

"Yeah, it's not so much a description, as—" Frasier stopped and seemed angry at the mention of the deity. "Actually, as far as the entity goes, Lord Malcolm has led the monks to believe that he is this being. That's why they have allowed him to set your friend up in the monastery. That was more or less the final straw that made me leave, as I told Lady Christina earlier."

"So they basically worship him," Jason murmured.

"Idolatry," I heard Stephen comment from the back of the group.

"Yeah," Frasier agreed. "It's a brainless thing."

I stepped forward a bit to catch Jason's eye. "So, Graves," I asked, "killed any gods lately?"

"Close, he was three down from...." He smiled, his voice trailing away.

"From God?" I asked.

"Well, Cain, anyway," he drawled. He pondered what Frasier had said, then muttered, "They worship the crone."

"Yeah?" I prompted him.

"It might be an easier way to get by them," he told me.

"Ah," I whispered. "I see where you're going with this. I don't like it, but I see where you're going." Jason was suggesting he take on the guise of Lord Malcolm. "That would work."

He glanced at my face. "Would you be more comfortable that way?" he asked so softly that Frasier was probably the only other person who heard him.

"No," I replied, "but I might like it a little better."

Jason grinned, and Frasier looked between the two of us questioningly.

"As long as you don't look like that when we're shooting," I told Jason. "We might hit the wrong one."

"Accidentally on purpose?" he asked.

I chuckled. "Only if you looked like Graves."

"I'm not Graves," he reminded me seriously. "I couldn't soak that."

We spotted two men talking near the stage, one in his late fifties, the other in his mid thirties. They seemed to be having a heated discussion. Jason headed for them, and I followed. Frasier brought up the rear while the others remained behind.

"Gentlemen," Jason interrupted, "is there a problem?"

The older man glanced up. "Father Elliot is not coming milord," he replied.

"Why?" I asked, trying for a polite tone of voice.

"He is receiving a delivery he had not expected today," the younger man said.

I frowned. "A delivery?" I pondered what that could mean. "A person or a package?"

The older man shrugged. "We do not know."

"Thank you for your assistance," Frasier said, putting a hand on my back and steering me toward the others.

As we walked toward the group, I thought about what the men had told us. "Labor. Delivery. Package," I murmured. Abruptly I remembered my suspicions about Lena's health and stopped. Jason and Frasier looked at me questioningly.

"Labor," I repeated. "Delivery. She's having the baby."

Jason looked stunned, and his hands started to shake. "We need to get there now," he growled.

I put a hand on his arm. "Let's talk to Lord Colin," I advised him, trying to keep calm myself. "This isn't the time or the place for this."

"Remember the note?" he reminded me almost frantically. "Remember his intentions?"

His words shook me to the core and I held my own growl in by sheer force of will.

Frasier put his hand on my lower back and applied pressure, again leading me toward the others. "What's wrong?" he whispered.

I clenched my hands together to stop them from shaking. "Lord Malcolm intends to... hurt Lena after the baby is born," I told him.

Shannon rose as we approached and took a step back. As we were explaining the situation, Cormac and Stephen rejoined the group, the latter stepping in front of Shannon to shield her from the sight of Jason and myself in near frenzy.

Colin agreed to let us use the carriage, and that quickly we were off. Frasier dismissed the driver and climbed into the high seat waiting for us to get in.

By this time I had calmed somewhat, but I nearly lost control again when Cormac and Stephen wouldn't let me sit next to Jason. I took a deep breath and knelt at his feet, holding his hands and talking to him softly in an effort to keep us both calm.

When we had left the campus grounds proper and were several minutes into the countryside, Stephen called for Frasier to stop. Frasier looked at me for confirmation, noting for the first time my location in the carriage. I shrugged and nodded, concentrating mostly on keeping Jason from frenzying at the delay.

Stephen and Cormac climbed from the carriage, giving me an opportunity to move up on the seat beside Jason. When the two returned, Stephen was in wolf form. Cormac opened the carriage door for the wolf to get in, but Stephen pawed the ground and acted like he was ready to run. He made a series of growls and barks, and Shannon seemed to understand him.

"Jason," I said quietly, "did we decide that you would shift to Malcolm's form so we could get inside easier?"

"I would advise against that," Cormac commented.

"Why?" I asked.

"If he is with her during the delivery," Jason answered, "wouldn't it look strange if he was also at the gate?" It was the first calm statement he had made since we got into the carriage that didn't involve killing Malcolm.

I looked at Cormac. "Is that your argument as well?"

"A portion of it," he nodded.

"Although if they saw that there were two of them, it might convince them that he is not their God," Jason added.

"What is the rest of your argument?" I asked Cormac, for the moment willing to listen to reason.

"Or will they realize that you are not their God and kill you?" he asked Jason, then gestured at everyone in the group as he spoke their name, "and Christina, and Nina, and Shannon, and Stephen and O'Connell and me?"

He looked into the distance where the monastery lay. "I have seen Lord Malcolm preaching to them," he told us. "With visions from your letter I have seen this. He obviously knows you are here, he knows what you are, what you look like. He knows you are here, he knows we are coming. Your deception has been for naught."

I felt the tension in Jason hands at Cormac's words, but I had to reluctantly agree with them. "We don't have a choice," I said sternly. "We have to go in and we have to get Lena and he has to die."

"And perhaps Lena is not aware of or will not believe what his plan is," Cormac warned me. "If it is his child, perhaps she won't want to leave. Perhaps she would rather stay with him."

I didn't like to think of that, but I knew it was a possibility. Jason looked shaken by the thought as well.

"Jesus fucking Christ," I bit out harshly, feeling the prick of my fangs against my lip.

Shannon stood and climbed down from the carriage quickly, going to stand near the wolf that was watching us closely.

"If we can't convince her or she doesn't want to leave, do you really think it's best to barge in looking as Malcolm?" Cormac asked. "Or Talon?"

I smiled grimly, retracting the fangs by sheer force of will. "Actually, if he went in looking like Graves she might want to go home," I told Cormac. "She likes him. I don't know why, but she does."

Then I sighed, remembering Frasier's words about Lena's tears. I hadn't wanted to tell Jason what he had said, but I knew that everyone needed to hear the truth. "I don't think Lena is there willingly, Cormac. She tried to escape at least once, didn't she, Frasier?" At that I looked at the man on the high seat.

He nodded. "Yes," he replied. "I was waiting for a moment to interrupt and tell everyone that."

"You have a mouth. You have a big gun." Jason told him quietly. He took a deep breath, then said firmly, "I think it would be best if I walked in there the way she remembers me. I've known her nearly as long as Graves has."

Cormac cleared his throat. "I would still recommend against the commando style attack," he repeated. "Let us walk in as ourselves. He knows what we are, and if Lena is delivering a child as we believe, she would make a very handy pawn in a fire fight." With that he gave me a pointed look.

I met his gaze with an even one of my own. I hadn't exactly been the poster child for serenity, but I could be calm when the situation called for it. "I'm cool," I told him.

Frasier looked approvingly at Cormac. "Level heads are needed at this point to retract the girl from this situation," he said bluntly. "There are a lot of variables going on that we don't know about yet. I suggest that we get to the monastery, see what they have to say, and see if they let us in."

Cormac nodded. "This is what I'm saying. He's agreeing with me."

I shot him a hard look. "I'm agreeing with you, Cormac. I said I'm cool."

"Violeta," Frasier called. "Would you care to rejoin us?"

With wary looks at Jason and me, she climbed in and sat opposite, still poised for battle or flight. When she was seated, Frasier shook the reins and started the horses forward. Stephen ran along side, easily keeping up with us.

I released Jason's hands, for the moment assured that he would stay calm. I put my briefcase on my lap and turned it away from the others before I opened it, trying to keep its contents out of sight. I pulled out my extra ammo and loaded my pockets then checked both of my guns to make sure they were fully loaded and ready to go. The others followed my example.

The number of weapons on Jason's person was frankly amusing. I caught Nina watching him, and said, "Believe in guns yet, Nina?"

She shook her head and smiled, adjusting her sleeve where I knew she kept very sharp throwing cards.

Jason looked up. "Have faith, believe," he told her with a wry glance to me. I watched him with sad eyes and tried to smile.

# THE BROTHERHOOD OF EVERLASTING PEACE

We may rise and fall, but in the end  
We meet our fate together  
One - Creed

The monastery walls were looming in the distance when Jason handed me a small package.

"What is it?" I asked.

"A bomb," he replied, already turning to check another weapon.

"Do you want to tell me how to set it off?" I asked.

He did so, quickly and efficiently. I put it in my pocket and sat twisting the ring on my finger until Frasier stopped the carriage at a hitching post near the monastery gate.

I climbed down and walked to where he was tying the horses in place. "Do you still have a problem with taking women into the monastery?" I asked softly. I glanced around and enhanced my senses, hoping to hear something from inside the wall that would help us.

He looked down at me. "I think we've already discussed this," he reminded me.

"I know we've discussed this," I replied impatiently. "Do you still feel the same?"

He nodded. "Yes."

I looked into his beautiful blue eyes, hesitant to bend his mind but knowing that at this point it was necessary. "You don't have a problem with women going into the monastery," I told him.

He frowned and looked puzzled.

"You know we need to get inside," I said firmly.

"Yes," he whispered.

"You're going to help all of us get inside," I stated. When he nodded, I smiled and added, "You did promise to obey me, you know."

"All right," he said with a grin. He turned and led us toward the gate.

Jason stepped up beside me and bent to whisper in my ear as I breathed a sigh of relief. "Two more times and you won't have to do that."

I glanced at his face and smiled sadly. "That's the perils of blood bonds," I replied. "Some good things, some bad things. Although, being on this end of it is definitely better than being on the receiving," I admitted, thinking of Luke and the full bond I held over him.

Cormac was shrugging into Stephen's trench coat as we reached the gate and I shot him an amused look. "Do you just take everyone's stuff?"

He smiled. "We're related, I was given permission."

Frasier pulled a bell cord near the gate and a small access door opened to reveal a man in a white hood.

"Are we in Oz?" Jason whispered to me.

"Are you the Tinman?" I asked, referring to the character's search for a heart.

"No," he replied, "but I don't trust the man behind the curtain."

"Brother Fr—Frasier," the monk behind the gate stuttered, "it is good to see you again."

Frasier nodded. "It is good to see you, Duncan," he replied politely. "Is Father Elliot in?"

The monk seemed very nervous, almost put off by the question. "Yes, he is," he replied. "He is in his quarters. Why, may I ask?"

"I have a matter that I must speak to him about," Frasier told the man. "I respectfully request that you allow me to pass."

At that moment a faint scream came from within the monastery, a woman's scream of pain. If I hadn't enhanced my senses earlier, I would never have heard it. "What the hell was that?" I demanded softly.

"What?" Jason asked.

"You didn't hear it?" I asked before I remembered that Nosferatu do not naturally have the ability to enhance their senses. Nina moved closer to the gate and I glanced at her. "Did you hear it?"

She nodded.

Frasier shot quick look at my worried face. "What did you hear?"

"I heard a scream," I told him.

"What kind of scream?" he asked.

I looked at Jason. "A woman's scream."

"Maybe you should come back later," the monk said. He was shaking, and he lifted a hand to close the small door in the gate.

Frasier's hand shot through and grabbed the monk's robes. "Duncan," he growled warningly, "open the gate."

"Frasier," the man protested in a shaking voice, "you know I can't do that."

Cormac moved closer to the small opening. When the monk looked at him, he ordered, "Sleep." Immediately, the man closed his eyes and sagged in Frasier's grasp.

"Okay," Frasier muttered as he dropped the monk and his bag to the ground. He reached through the opening, trying to get hold of the interior lock. "That was good in theory, but—"

Cormac grabbed Frasier's shirt and pulled him to the side. "Jason," he prompted just as Jason kicked the gate open. The right half of the gate flew back against the wall with a loud crash. "Let him get some anger out."

Frasier looked at me, excitement written on his face. "Can I...?"

I smiled and patted his shoulder. "We can work up to that," I told him. "You want to grab your bag? You might need it."

Frasier and I followed Jason and Stephen into the monastery. We found ourselves in a small courtyard with a garden to our left, clotheslines to our right, and several buildings straight ahead. I heard another scream and it seemed to be coming from a two-story building about a hundred yards away.

"Well," Cormac drawled as we noticed three monks drop their gardening tools and run off. "They know we're here."

Stephen and Shannon took off toward the building I'd heard the scream coming from, and Frasier followed them quickly. Nina was but a step ahead of me, and I heard Jason and Cormac coming after us. Shannon stopped on the porch of the house to guard the door, but the rest of us hurried inside. I followed the others up the stairs and down a hallway. Frasier opened a door, and Stephen shot inside, and Frasier was only a little slower to enter. Nina stopped in the doorway, and I looked over her shoulder at the scene inside as another scream echoed through the hall.

Lena was lying on a bed draped in a sheet. A tall man sat on a stool at the end of the bed, obviously readying himself for the delivery of a child. Stephen was dashing around the room, smelling everything. Frasier had stepped to one side, his gun ready.

A closer look at Lena's face as I pushed past Nina to get to her side showed that she had been crying. She was covered in sweat, and the sheet was soaked with it.

"Who the hell are you?" the man at the end of the bed demanded. I assumed from the description we'd been given that he was Duke Rutgar.

Nina walked to his side. "What do you need?" she asked urgently. "Can I help?"

He glanced up at her and gestured to a nearby table. "Get washed up and hand me what I ask for."

I knelt at Lena's side and called her name.

"Christina?" she asked wearily as I took her hand. Another contraction kicked in and she arched her back in pain.

I looked across the bed to see Jason kneeling there. He seemed to be gesturing me to help her. "Lena," I called softly, "Lena, look at me."

She shook her head. "I can't," she cried through gritted teeth.

I squeezed her hand. "No, come on," I encouraged her. "Let me help you, look at me." I wanted her to relax, but the only way I could make her do it was if I could make eye contact with her.

"Where is Mikael?" she sobbed, pain wracking her body.

"He's waiting for you," I told her.

I glanced over at Jason to see him pantomiming taking a ring off. I looked at him as if he were crazy. "In the middle of this?" I demanded. "You want me to take the ring off in the middle of this? Are you out of your fucking mind?"

I turned back to Lena. "Come on, look at me," I told her softly.

"Jason?" she whispered when she caught a glimpse of him. "Is that you?"

"Who the hell are you bloody people?" the Duke demanded again.

"We're her friends," I replied calmly. "You deliver the baby and we'll take care of her."

I continued to try to make Lena look at me, but the contraction was too strong and she screamed Mikael's name.

"He's waiting for you," I soothed. "You just have to calm down."

"Is there any way we could bring Mikael here?" Jason asked me.

I shook my head.

Suddenly the air around Jason changed and in his place knelt the man Lena was screaming for.

"Mikael?" she whimpered. Jason smoothed her sweat soaked hair from her face. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you," she cried. "Jason is in danger."

Jason gathered her into his arms and held her gently as the contraction vibrated through her body. I noticed Cormac and the wolf leaving the room from the corner of my eye and called absently for Frasier to watch the door.

"Why is he in danger?" Jason asked softly.

Lena was panting heavily as the pain in her body eased. "His sire is here," she breathed.

I turned her head and forced her to look at me. "Relax," I ordered.

She did.

"I don't know what you're doing," Rutgar muttered, "but keep it up, I've almost got the head."

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you," she said to the man she thought was Mikael. "I just found out, before—" She stopped as another contraction built inside of her.

I looked at Jason helplessly as we held her up to push. Within minutes the baby was born. Jason cut the umbilical cord, as proud as the real Mikael would have been to do so. Stephen had returned

in human form and he took the baby to clean him up, then cared for him while I changed Lena and settled her into fresh sheets. Jason went into the hallway with Cormac.

When we were done, Rutgar glanced around. "Who are you people?" he asked again.

"You are Duke Rutgar, I presume," I said.

"Yes."

I introduced him to everyone, then added, "Your wife is worried about you."

He shook his head. "I was afraid of that," he mused. "It was unfortunate circumstances that brought me here. What brought you here?"

"Lady Lena is a friend," I told him. "We're here to bring her home."

He nodded, then turned to talk to Nina. Lena was feeding the baby, so I walked to where Frasier stood in the doorway, and peered out.

I blinked twice before I recognized the mostly decayed remains on the floor as that of a Kindred. "Did Jason do this?" I asked Frasier.

He nodded. "Cormac said it was Jason's sire," he told me.

"Good," I said firmly. "Where did they go?"

Frasier shrugged.

I looked back at the Duke. "Can Lena be moved?" I asked him.

"She's lost a lot of blood," he replied, "but if you are careful and it isn't far, she can be."

"We'll only move her a few feet," I promised him. He frowned and looked at me questioningly, but I only smiled in return.

"Frasier," I said to him, "go find the guys. We're getting out of here."

Frasier paused, then turned to the Duke. "Your wife's carriage is waiting for you at the gate."

"My thanks, O'Connell," Rutgar replied.

Frasier had only just walked out of the room when he returned with the others. Stephen was holding an unconscious Shannon in his arms, but she appeared to be breathing so I didn't worry for her health, knowing that whatever injuries she had sustained, she would heal quickly.

"Are we ready?" I asked them.

"Yes," Jason said, still looking like Mikael.

"I have a few belongings in the carriage," Stephen replied.

"As do I," Cormac added.

"We will have about five minutes, before the portal opens," I reminded them. "Why don't you guys go and get everyone's things from the carriage while we wait here."

Lena called Rutgar over to her. "Thank you," she told him earnestly. "If it weren't for you I would have lost my sanity worrying, and I would never have had my son."

"Just don't name him Graves," I muttered softly. I was just as glad she didn't hear me.

Duke Rutgar said his good-byes and took his leave with Stephen, who had handed Shannon to Cormac.

I took off the ring and put it in my pocket. Within moments, a tiny bead of light began to form in a corner of the room. I moved away from it and pulled Frasier into a corner of the room. I glanced at the others and saw that our movements had gone unnoticed for the moment.

He looked at me questioningly, and I smiled sadly. "Look, Frasier," I began, "my life hasn't exactly been easy, and if you come with me I can guarantee that everything won't be sunlight and roses. I

think I've got a shot at doing something right here and I don't want to screw that up. Before you make this commitment, before either of us have regrets, I have to be totally honest with you."

He nodded for me to go on, but didn't comment.

"You were right," I told him, "I do need someone to watch over me, someone to keep me safe from both friend and foe, maybe even from myself. I need someone I can trust, Frasier, and if you give me a chance I'll do my best for you, and I promise you'll always be able to count on me."

He shifted until he stood between the others and me and I was grateful he had done so when tears filled my eyes at my next words.

"But here's the thing; I do love Jason. He will always be my soul, and it doesn't matter if we don't end up together." I took a deep breath to calm my voice, then said, "I know there's no way around that for me and I just have to deal with it the best I can. I won't tell you that we'll ever be anything more than friends, O'Connell, but somehow I know we'd be good friends."

His eyes were warm and I knew he agreed with me.

I smiled. "You have to be sure about this, because you know if you freak out, I'll have to kill you. My world is very different from yours, much more dangerous. You can stay here and be safe, or come with me, take your chances, and change your life forever. What do you say, Frasier? You game?"

He grinned. "I can take anything you can throw my way," he promised.

"It could be a lot," I warned him.

"I think I can handle it," he told me.

He bent to kiss me, but I lowered my head, mindful of Jason's presence in the room. Frasier's lips were warm against my forehead. He straightened, and said, "I'm ready for whatever you can give me."

I hugged him, taking strength from his arms around me. "Let's do it," I said as I pulled away.

Hearing Stephen reenter the room I looked around Frasier to see that the portal was now fully open. I could see the real Mikael waiting for us with Robert on the other side. I went over to Lena and very gently took the baby from her. He cooed up at me, and I smiled. Jason picked up Lena and stepped through the portal.

Frasier picked up my briefcase, and I held my hand out to him. Without hesitation he took it and we stepped through together.

# LEAVETAKING

Give me one reason to stay here  
And I'll turn right back around  
Give Me One Reason - Tracy Chapman

Mikael had taken Lena from Jason immediately, and now Jason looked like himself again. Mikael backed away from the portal and glanced at me when I stepped through. When he saw the baby, he frowned and looked at me questioningly.

"If you put Lena down," I said softly, "you'd be able to hold your baby."

Mikael looked stunned and his eyes darted between the baby and Lena.

"He's yours," I assured him. "Time was different there."

"But you've only been gone for five minutes," he replied as he sat Lena down gently on one of the couches.

"Months have passed since Lena left here," I explained. "We were there two days." I passed the baby into his waiting arms and he gazed down at the boy in wonder. I turned to see that everyone had joined us and the portal was closing.

Stephen put Shannon down on the other couch in the room, but she didn't stir. Robert went to her side and ran a hand over her body, pausing at the injury in her chest. He looked at Stephen, who was kneeling by her side.

"Friend of yours?" he asked Stephen. The Garou nodded, and my brother held out his hand. "Robert Strong."

"How do you do? I'm Brother Stephen."

"Do you mind?" Robert asked. "I can help her."

Stephen looked up at him. "She'll be all right in a short time."

"I can make her all right now," Robert replied.

Stephen shrugged, confident that Shannon's regenerative abilities would heal her quickly.

Robert took his response for an affirmative and touched the girl's forehead with his fingertips. Immediately she stirred and looked at Stephen.

"Stephen?" she murmured. "What are you doing here? I haven't seen you since Dublin. Where are we? What happened?" She seemed to have regained all her memories of our world, but lost any memories of Ramadan.

Robert had moved to Lena's side and was examining her in much the same way he had examined Shannon. When he was through, he looked at Mikael. "Do you mind if I help her?"

Mikael glanced up from his perusal of the baby. "By all means, please," he replied.

Robert touched Lena's forehead and she opened her eyes, all signs of weariness gone. "Okay, that was weird," she whispered. She looked around, then threw her arms around Mikael's neck. "Mikael!"

I turned away from watching him hold her and the baby, happy for her but unable to stop the sadness that poured over me.

Then it hit me that although we had spent two full days in Ramadan in our world it was still the same night we had left. I still had time to get to Salem before the clan called a blood hunt on me. I would have to leave immediately, and take the box so I could travel during the day, but I could still make it in time. The only thing I had to do first was explain my rush to Jason.

I looked around for him and when I didn't see him right away, I realized that I had felt him leave several minutes before. I scanned the room quickly to make sure, but I knew he was gone. It was like I'd been hit by a freight train. Jason had said we needed to talk when we returned home, but the first thing he did was disappear. I shook my head, knowing deep down that I would never be a priority to him. My heart broke again in that moment and I turned away from the group until I could control my emotions.

When I turned back, my heart and face were cold. "Robert," I said softly, "can I have a word with you in the hall?"

He nodded and followed me out of the room. "What is it, Christina?" he asked.

"Robert, I have to ask a favor of you," I told him. I didn't want to leave without seeing Jason again, but perhaps it was for the best. He apparently didn't want to talk to me anyway. "I need you to get me out of here."

"Okay."

"Now," I added urgently.

"Okay." Just like that he would help me, even after all those years.

I sighed in relief. "It will be you, me and Frasier."

"The man in the kilt," Robert stated.

I smiled wryly. "Yeah, I made a new friend."

He shrugged. "Okay, whatever you want."

At that moment, Lena came from the living room. "Christina!" she cried as she hurried toward me.

I hugged her, overwhelmed with relief and happiness that she was okay. "Lena, I'm so glad you're all right."

"I have a favor to ask you," she confided. "I haven't asked Mikael, but I'm sure it will be okay. I want you to be the baby's Godmother."

I was shocked. "You do remember what I am, right?" I asked her softly.

She chuckled. "I remember. There's no one else I would consider, Christina. Will you?"

Tears filled my eyes. "I would be honored," I whispered as I hugged her again.

"It's so good to see you," she told me as she hugged me again. "Don't stay away so long this time."

I smiled sadly, unwilling to tell her I would be leaving shortly. "I'll come back soon," I whispered.

She straightened, wiping her own tears away. "Some of you are hungry," she laughed. "I'm going to get some refreshments." She seemed to see Robert for the first time and looked at him in surprise. "Robert, it's been a long time."

He kissed her hand. "It's good to see you again, Lena," he told her.

She glanced from one of us to the other, but was too polite to ask the questions I saw in her eyes. "I'll be back in a few minutes," she said quietly.

When she was gone, I turned back to Robert. "She doesn't know you're my brother?"

He shook his head. "I wasn't using the name Strong when we met."

I wondered if that meant Graves also didn't know he was my brother. I gestured toward the stairs and said, "I'd like to get my things together and leave now."

"I'll go up with you and get my things as well."

We went upstairs silently, each lost in our own thoughts. I kept thinking about Jason leaving the room without a word. I felt cold, colder than I could ever remember feeling in my life. I packed my clothes and changed into the things I had worn to go through the portal into Ramadan. I let the

cross hang between my breasts and settled the leather jacket on my shoulders, grateful for its familiar weight.

Lena.

I am so glad that you are back safe with the one you love. I can't believe you're a mother! I hope everything will be fine now. You know that you can always count on me if you need me. Be happy, and stay safe.

I'm in a little trouble with the clan, so I have to leave now, tonight.

Please don't mention this to anyone else. I have enough things to worry about than to add pity from others as well. I'm sorry that I have to go this way, but you must understand that even if the clan didn't require it, I couldn't stay here with Jason and know that he doesn't care for me the way I do for him. I will be back in time for the christening, no matter what it takes. Hopefully by then I'll have had time to adjust myself to a life without Jason or Luke and can better handle his presence, if he's still here.

I also have to apologize for my behavior the last two years. I know I haven't been much of a friend, and I have no excuse for it. I will make every effort not to let my feelings for Jason overshadow our relationship, you are like a sister to me and I don't want to lose that again.

I'll call you when I get to Salem.

Love, Christina

I sat down at the writing desk and penned a short note to Lena.

I sat at the desk staring off into space for a few minutes. Could I just walk away and not leave Jason even a word as to why I had left? What if I was wrong about his reasons for leaving? What if he really hadn't gone far and came back to find me gone? I pulled out another piece of paper and quickly penned a note to him.

Jason.

You once asked me if I've ever wondered what life would be like if I lost one of my senses, or one of my limbs. I don't have to wonder because it happened to me. You took my heart with you when you walked away.

When I lost you, the light went out of my life. Having Frasier with me won't change that, but it will help me to survive losing you again. He'll keep me safe, he'll always care for me, and most importantly, he'll never leave me. This is one relationship that I will control, completely.

If you think me having a ghoul will change how I feel about you, then you never really knew me at all. I tried everything I could to get over you, Jason, and nothing helped. I used Luke the best I could to fill the void you left behind, but I spent two years living with him, mostly blood bonded to him, and every time he touched me, I wanted it to be you.

I don't want Graves to be a ghost in our lives the way that you were in my life with Luke. I couldn't bear to be with you and know with every night that passed that someone else meant more to you than I do. I don't want to look at you one night and know the truth about how you felt, the way Luke did when he looked at me and realized that I loved you more than anything else, more than life itself. I don't know how he survived it, I know I would never be able to.

I'm giving you the ring back because I don't need it to remind me of you anymore. Now I know that you are always with me, no matter what happens or where I am. As long as I live, I will never forget you, never stop loving you. As long as some part of me exists, the love I have for you will live on.

I'm not saying goodbye, but I am asking you to think about it, Jason. If you decide that you feel the same way for me that I do for you, then come to me in Salem. I'll be waiting for you, but remember that I can't wait forever. I've tried to be patient, but if you find that you can't love me wholly, completely and without reservations, please do us both a favor and stay out of my life. If I can't get what I need from you, then it's time I really did get over it.

Forever Yours,

Christina

I wiped the tears from my face as I signed my name to the bottom. I read the note over, making sure I hadn't left anything out. Then I shook my head; I knew that writing that note was either the stupidest thing I'd ever done, or the smartest. I folded the note and slid the ring from my finger. I looked at the ring for a long minute, then smiled sadly, thinking of Jason. Despite the pain I felt,

there was no way I could regret having known him, having loved him, even after all that had happened.

I slipped into his room and left the note on his bed, standing for a moment among his things. I breathed the faint scent of him, and mourned once more the relationship we had lost with his embrace. I sighed, and strode quickly from the room, needing more than anything to be gone before he showed up.

I collected my luggage and met Robert back downstairs in the hall. I stuck my head into the living room briefly and called softly to Frasier. No one seemed to notice his exit.

"We need to leave," I told him, "now."

He shrugged. "Sure."

Robert went for the wagon while Frasier and I brought the box out of the Holding's basement. Between the two of us we got it outside easily and into the back of the wagon with the rest of our luggage. Robert and I got into the back with the box, and Frasier climbed into the driver's seat and followed Robert's directions away from the holding.

"What's the rush?" Frasier asked as he steered the horses into the night.

"When it's time, it's time." I noticed Robert looking strangely at Frasier. "Robert, this is Frasier O'Connell," I told him. "Frasier will be staying with me for a while."

Robert gave me a probing look, but didn't comment.

"Frasier, this is my brother Robert. He will be traveling with us as far as Paris, at least," I said, looking to Robert for confirmation.

My brother nodded. "Good to meet you, O'Connell."

Frasier glanced over his shoulder. "And you as well," he replied.

"Robert," I asked softly, "why didn't you ask me why I had to leave?" It had seemed too easy. He shrugged. "You're my sister, I didn't need to know why," he told me simply.

"That's it?" I still didn't understand.

"Do I need anything more?" He seemed surprised that I had even asked.

I shook my head. "We haven't even seen each other in how many years?"

He smiled and took my hand. "Blood is thicker than water," he reminded me. "Just because your blood is different now doesn't mean anything to me."

"Just because I've changed, doesn't mean I've changed," I whispered.

"Exactly."

I leaned across the bed of the wagon and hugged him. His arms went around me and I relished the comfort he gave me. Tears pricked my eyelids and I let them come. Robert held me close, and we rocked to the rhythm of the wagon for a long time.

When I sat back, I dried my face and began to explain my world to Frasier. I knew that it would take some time for him to adjust to his new surroundings, but right then I believed that time was all we had.

Robert, apparently seeing that I needed some time alone, climbed into the driver's seat with Frasier and took over the explanations. I listened to the drone of their conversation and thought about Jason.

I didn't know if Jason would come for me, but I knew I would wait for him, at least for a while. The two years I'd spent with Luke in Vegas hadn't changed what I felt for Jason, I didn't think another year in Salem would either. I told myself I would give him six months, and if he didn't come to Salem by spring, I would.... Who was I kidding? I knew I would wait for him until the end of time.