



CHRISTINA: ALTERNITY

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MY SIRE

FORGIVE ME FOR THE THINGS I DID
AND GIVE ME SOMETHING TO BELIEVE IN
SOMETHING TO BELIEVE IN - POISON

I sat back against the side of the wagon and looked up at the stars in the dark Austrian sky. I closed my eyes and thought of my sire, the man who was closer to me than my own father, the man who had been my only father I'd known for the first five years of my remembered existence. Antonio Moreno had found me on the streets of Las Vegas and taken me in. He had treated me as if I was his own progeny, taught me everything I needed to know about surviving as a Kindred.

Sire? I called to him in my mind.

Yes my childe? Antonio sounded surprised, almost shocked.

You seem surprised to hear from me, I replied calmly.

Well, it is always a good thing to hear from you, although lately the occasions have been few and far between, he reminded me.

Antonio, king of the guilt trips.

He read my thoughts, a byproduct of the mental link. *Well,* he replied, *fathers must do that to some extent.*

Even though he wasn't my father, Antonio was closer to me than my own father was, much closer. He was my friend, my mentor, my sire. *At least it wasn't as long this time,* I told him with a smile he could sense but not see. *It's only been a few days.*

This is true.

We just returned from... another world is all I can call it, I told him.

What do you mean my childe? he asked.

We followed Lena Stockton into an alternate universe called Ramadan and it was quite different than ours, I explained.

You actually went there? His words nearly reverberated with shock.

Yes, have you heard of this place? He'd never spoken to me of it, but then again it wasn't as if I had talked to him that much in the last two years.

I've heard of it, he replied, *but I've never heard of anyone going there.*

Well, all of us did, I told him. *Cormac Brennan, Nina Rodriguez, Jason Kline and I.* I waited for some kind of reaction to Jason's name.

And how did everything go? he asked smoothly.

I decided it was best to leave the issue of Jason alone for the time being. *We brought Lena back.*

That is not what I was speaking of, my child, he said wryly.

I struggled to keep my mind blank, knowing that Antonio had always been able to read more than what I wanted him to. *What do you want me to say?*

The truth.

The problem was that I didn't know myself what the truth was. Jason's behavior had confused me from the moment I'd seen him get out of the carriage at Lena's Holding.

Things did not turn out as you had hoped? Antonio asked softly, kindness and compassion wrapped around the words. Antonio knew how much I truly loved Jason.

I don't know what I hoped for— I stopped, knowing I lied. No, I know what I hoped for and I didn't get it. I don't know that I ever will, but at least we had an opportunity to talk.

That is the first step, he reminded me.

I sighed, remembering how Jason had disappeared without a word when we'd returned to the Holding. In this case it may be the last.

Have faith, Antonio told me.

Faith. I shook my head. *I've never been one for faith, sire, as you well know.*

Ah, he replied, *but there is a time a place for everything.*

I decided to change the subject. *Lena is a mother.* I knew I would have to come back for the christening, and I hoped that Elvira would give me leave to do so.

Oh, how wonderful, he said. I was rather surprised at his enthusiasm, Antonio was not known for his great regard of mortals.

Actually it was quite surprising to everyone except Lena. Mikael seemed rather happy about it though, I told him. *I did tell you that the four of us went over, I should also tell you that seven of us came back.* I didn't count the baby.

Childe?

Cormac has discovered a nephew, I explained. *Stephen Brennan.*

Yes, Antonio murmured. *I believe I have heard of this.*

He had heard of this? *Have you talked to them?*

The only reply I received was an expectant silence that told me he had in fact spoken with at least one of the three Kindred I had left behind at the Holding, probably Nina or Cormac. I really didn't think Jason would have called him.

Then you will know that Stephen joined us in Ramadan, I continued. *He met up with a friend of his that had gotten over there somehow. Her name is Shannon, and she had no memory of how she had traveled to that world. She also has the... gift that Stephen has.* Stephen was a werewolf, and so was Shannon.

I felt tired and drained from the events of the last few days. I longed to climb in the box and sleep, but dawn was still a long way off.

Childe, Antonio prompted after a moment, his words full of amusement, *I know that you suffer from amnesia, but I did not realize that it affected your math skills.*

I knew that he'd sensed there had been someone beside the baby that I hadn't mentioned. *There was another that we brought back with us,* I admitted, glancing up at the man driving the wagon. *Frasier O'Connell.*

And is he from this world as well? Antonio asked.

Actually, no, I replied hesitantly, unsure of his reaction to my new... friend. *He's from the other world, but he was looking for a change, so I—he was quite helpful in finding Lena, so—*

So you decided to play God and give him new adventures?

I smiled inwardly. *Well, he did beg quite prettily.* He had.

Childe, I sense that you want to tell me something, he told me, his Spanish accent dragging through my mind.

Well, I have begun the ghoul-ing process with this gentleman, I admitted.

Have you any idea the responsibility it takes? he asked slowly.

His tone made me wary. *I have an idea.*

Antonio's reply was garbled but the meaning was clear. *Damn kids and their toys.*

I tried not to take offense at his words. When you're over five hundred years old, you tend to look at everyone under a hundred as a kid. *You will remember, sire, that I'm a little older than Brenda, and that neither one of us are children.*

The both of you do not have to keep reminding me of that fact, he said, sounding disgruntled.

I tried not to laugh out loud. *I take it you've talked to Brenda lately.* Brenda Thompson was Antonio's true childe, and we considered ourselves sisters, although we had been of no relation as mortals.

Antonio was also trying not to laugh. *What makes you think that my childe?*

I understand she's also taken a ghoul, I told him.

Yes she has, he replied. *He's quite an interesting young man.*

You've met him? That was a surprise, from what I understood he'd only been bound to her a few weeks.

Yes, he responded, *when she came out here.*

I was confused. *When did she come out there?*

To inform Graves of Lena's disappearance, of course, he answered.

I gave a mental shrug. *I figured she'd just call him.* That was what I'd asked her to do when I found out Lena was missing.

I believe she took the opportunity to visit her sire, Antonio murmured meaningfully, *a common courtesy that happens from time to time.*

I winced, knowing that although I had lived a lot closer to Antonio than Brenda, I hadn't visited him in the last two years. Graves had only been one reason for my absence. *Don't expect me to come to LA,* I sent back to him firmly.

No, not any time soon, he agreed the accent again strong in his words. *It is too close to Las Vegas.*

It's a little too close to Graves, I replied before I remembered why I was supposed to stay away from Las Vegas. "Ooh," I said both mentally and aloud. I covered my eyes and hoped that Antonio would not pursue the subject of my Gangrel ex-lover.

Childe, Antonio said meaningfully, *I sense there is something you want to tell me.*

Not really, I told him, wincing. I didn't want to explain that I had been partially blood bonded to Luke Thomas and had never told anyone in the Tremere clan. I definitely didn't want to tell Antonio that Luke was fully bonded to me.

"Christina?" I heard Frasier say in his deep honeyed voice.

"Yeah?" I glanced up to see him looking down at me.

"Are you all right?" His brown hair fell over his forehead and his eyes glittered in the starlight.

"Yeah," I told him. "You just hit a bump."

"I'm sorry, I'll be more careful."

I smiled. "That's okay, I'm tough. I can take it."

He reached back and touched my hair. I laid my hand on his arm, thankful for the reassurance of his presence.

"I'm fine," I repeated. "Just watch the bumps."

I heard a mental clearing of Antonio's throat and looked away from Frasier to return my attention to my sire.

Sorry, I told him. *I was talking to Frasier.*

Yes, I saw that, he said softly. Indeed. At least my daughters have an excellent eye when it comes to choosing a male companion. However, tell me childe, how did it fare with Jason?

Jason. I was grateful for the change of topic, but I wished that Antonio had chosen a different one. I really didn't know what to tell him. I don't know.

You didn't see him?

I saw him, I replied slowly. I had lived through him walking out on me once again. I talked to him. I don't know how it went. I sighed and laid my head back against the wagon's side. I don't know what he'll do, I left him a note and... I don't know what he'll do. I didn't really have time to wait for him.

Things will work out in the end, Antonio assured me.

I closed my eyes, unable to bring myself to believe his words. I don't know if the hold that Graves has over him is greater than what he feels for me. If it is, then I can't live with that. Jason had been Graves' ghoulish before Malcolm had abducted him; he had been blood bound to Graves for ten years. His embrace had broken the blood bond to Graves and changed Jason's life forever. To say that my life had changed as well was an understatement.

I understand, Antonio told me kindly. Wait and see how the cards are played.

I will do my best, I replied, remembering the course feel of Jason's fingers as he'd held my hand.

I have a feeling that there may be a card yet to play, Antonio told me cryptically.

What do you mean? I asked.

There is always an act of divinity that could change things, he replied.

I shook my head. I can't see what would change this.

Have faith, childe, he repeated.

Jason was the one with faith, I reminded him, mourning for Jason's lost humanity, and for his faith in God that hadn't survived his embrace. I've never had it, that was never me.

And now he doesn't either, Antonio commented quietly.

So I guess neither of us have faith, do we? Although my real father was a priest, I still had no idea what my level of involvement with the church had been. I had been thinking about it a great deal, but I knew I would never be able to redeem myself in God's eyes. After all, I'm demon, aren't I? A vampire that required blood to survive, fallen like Caine from God's grace.

You must have faith in something, he told me. Then, thankfully, he changed the subject. So you will be going to Salem posthaste?

I am currently on my way. I had taken a big risk going to Austria to help Lena. Elvira Van Dorn, the Kindred prince of Salem, had given me a week to get to her city. As she was of the Tremere clan and much higher in it's hierarchy than I, of course I had to obey her. I was thankful that I could still make it to Salem within the time frame she had allowed.

I remembered my other travelling companion. I met an interesting person in Paris, I said carefully. He is a friend of Graves, actually, but he's also.... Well, his name is Robert Strong.

When Antonio didn't answer, I realized that Robert having the same last name as me didn't mean anything to him. He's my brother, I explained.

How wonderful, Antonio replied, happy for me but a little confused. I was not aware that you had a brother.

Neither was I, I told him wryly, but Graves may have been.

Hmm. Maybe he did not make the connection, Antonio said. Graves knows many people.

I found it very hard to believe that Graves could be close friends with Robert, send Jason to save my life because someone involved with my father wanted me dead, and not know that Robert was my brother.

Childe, Antonio warned, you don't always have all the answers. Don't be so quick to judge or assume things.

I didn't answer, mostly because I believed that Graves was not the man most people thought him to be. I got the impression from Antonio that he believed Graves was a better man than I supposed him to be.

Apparently Graves is not a subject we are going to agree on, I observed. Perhaps we should avoid it altogether.

I don't try to justify his actions to you, Antonio replied, but patience and understanding are— Not something I'll ever have toward Graves, I thought to myself.

—virtues that you need to develop all round, Antonio continued over my objection. Tolerance is another.

Not something I'm going to have for Graves, sire, I repeated. I tried to be as respectful as possible in my objection, but I really didn't like Graves.

I heard Antonio's mental sigh. If you wish to live as long as I have, you must realize that these things are important.

I'll be fine as long as I stay out of LA, I thought firmly.

Yes, he agreed, perhaps that would be best.

Oh, definitely, at this point.

The main thing is that you stay away from Las Vegas. Hmm, tolerance, Antonio repeated, it is a good thing.

I got a mental picture of Luke from Antonio and had to agree. *In some cases. Have you had any news from Las Vegas?* I couldn't stop myself from asking.

No I have not, Antonio replied carefully. Do you wish me to speak to Idella?

No, no, that's okay, I assured him quickly. The Tremere Primogen of Vegas was mad enough at me already. I knew it would be better if I had no contact with Luke, to the point of not knowing what he was doing or even how he was. I hoped that he wouldn't come looking for me.

That does not give you leave to call her, either, Antonio warned. Or anyone else. I heard the subtle threat in his words and knew that if I was unable to break the blood bond on my own, Antonio would break it for me the only way he could; he would send Luke to his final death.

I understand that. Not that it would do me much good if I did, I thought more to myself than to him, the phone's been disconnected.

Oh, how unfortunate. His tone told me that he thought it was best. Have you called your sister yet?

No, I told him. I thought I would call you first, in a manner of speaking.

I am glad to know how important I am to you, he replied with a smile in his words.

Well, for a time I had my priorities skewed, I admitted, but I'm trying to set them straight.

That is good. I sensed from him the need to return to his work. Call your sister, and call me when you are settled.

I will.

And have her teach you the little mind thing so you can contact her without a telephone.

I will tell her you said so, sire, I replied.

I felt him leave my mind and sighed, happy that I was talking to my sire again. The last two years seemed like a nightmare that I had been trapped in and I knew that a return to family and clan was best. I felt more secure at that moment than I had felt even in Luke's arms. I had to admit it was a good feeling.

BRENDA THOMPSON

THE LINE IS SO FINE

BETWEEN HOPING AND HURTING

THE BEAST - CONCRETE BLONDE

Taking my cell phone from the inside pocket of my leather jacket, I dialed Brenda's number. It rang a long time before she answered.

"Hello?" She sounded breathless, which is, I have to say, unusual for a vampire. We don't breathe.

I smiled. "Do you always misplace your phone or are you always busy with Rafael?" I could just imagine what they had been doing.

"I didn't know where I put it," she told me.

"You're lying," I replied with a great deal of amusement.

"I'm serious," she said, but I heard the smile in her voice.

"You always know where that thing is," I reminded her.

"Well, some weird shit happened last night and we got in late."

"What kind of weird shit?" She'd told me there were some problems, but not what.

"Michael."

That surprised me. Michael Moorecock had left Brenda when she'd been embraced. He'd told he was giving her time to adjust to her change, but he was really the one who needed to adjust to it. "You saw him?"

"Kind of," she whispered, "sort of, but not really. I spoke with him much the way I speak with Antonio."

"Ah." I waited for her to tell me about it, but she changed the subject.

"How did everything go?" she asked.

"Well, Lena is a mother," I told her. "She asked me to be godmother," I whispered through tears that had sprung to my eyes at the memory.

"A baby." Brenda sounded wistful.

"Yeah," I replied as I wiped the happy tears from my cheeks.

"That's wonderful." She sounded as if she would burst into tears herself.

"We found her, and she's okay and she's back with Mikael." Lena's fiancé had been very happy to see her and their new child.

"Well, I'm glad one of us has succeeded at least."

"Well, I wouldn't go that far," I told her. The others had had more to do with the rescue than I had. "I left the holding rather quickly." I moved to the back of the wagon bed in the hopes that this part of the conversation would go unheard by the men on the seat.

"How did everything go?" she asked again.

"We went in," I told her, trying to simplify things. "We got Lena, we got out."

"Yeah, and...?" she prompted.

"Oh, I'm bringing a new friend," I said quickly. "Someone I met over there. We went to another world, by the way, it was rather strange."

"What?"

"Yeah," I smiled and said. "We went to another dimension and it was totally different, like way different, and there was this guy and he's got nice legs. And—" I had to laugh both at my words and the imagery they brought to mind. Somehow I always fell into a younger way of speaking when I talked to Brenda.

"What is he," she asked warily, "Gangrel?"

"No, actually," I chuckled, "he's quite human."

"Oh, my." I seemed to have surprised her again. "Have we been playing?"

"Well," I murmured, "I thought I'd take my little sister's cue."

"Oh, no, Chris was it bad?"

Bad? How could feeding blood to a human be bad? "Was what bad?"

"With Jason?"

My eyes narrowed suspiciously. "How did you know Jason was there?"

"Well, um, Graves sent for him I guess," she sputtered.

"Was that before or after you flew to LA?" I asked coolly.

"After," she reluctantly admitted.

"And what exactly did you say to Jason?" I demanded.

"Why what makes you think I said anything?"

As if I didn't know her at all. "I'm just putting a few puzzle pieces together," I told her. "What did you say to him?"

"Well, now," she muttered, "that would be telling."

"Brenda," I said warningly, "despite appearances, I do not need help in my love life."

"I did not make an attempt to help you in your love life."

"I hope that's the case," I told her, "because I would hate to think that Jason was being semi-nice to me because of something you said."

"I highly doubt it," she replied.

I sighed and rubbed my forehead.

"I told him that he was the cruelest person in the world because of what he'd done to you," Brenda confessed in a rush. "I also said that I hoped he had more feelings for Lena than he did for you in his black heart so that she could be returned to those who loved her, something I was sure was beyond him now."

"Ouch," I breathed. Jason had proved just how much he cared for Lena while we were in Ramadan, and how little he cared for me when we'd returned to the holding.

"Sometimes you just need to be poked—" Brenda added.

"Clawed," I corrected.

"—to realize what a fool you've been." I heard a kissing sound from the other end of the line.

"What are you doing?" I asked suspiciously.

"Nothing," she said too quickly. "Talking to you."

I remembered her breathlessness when she answered the phone. "I didn't interrupt anything, did I?"

"No," she said slowly, "we were done."

I closed my eyes. "God, you didn't have to take me there," I told her.

"Well you know you can go down this same road to if you want to, by the sounds of it," she replied.

I glanced up at Frasier. "Not that he'd need much encouragement," I mumbled.

Brenda chuckled. "So how many times have you fed him?"

"Once."

"Really?" she asked. "And he's already...?"

I smiled. "He was ready before." Frasier was more than willing to begin an intimate relationship with me, but he was also patient enough to wait until I was ready for it.

"Really?" I heard her pleasure for me in her voice. "Ooh, you got a live one."

Despite myself, I laughed. "I don't want to make any sudden decisions," I told her. "I don't know what's going to happen from here."

"I hope I don't have to tell you what could happen from here," she insinuated.

I sighed. "It depends on which guy in my life you're talking about, the Gangrel, the Nosferatu or the ghoul."

"Well," she said firmly, "we're going to get the Gangrel right on out of your hair, wash him out like shampoo."

"We'll do our best," I agreed sadly.

"Maybe you'll find better," she suggested. "Someone who'll be there for you no matter what and you won't have to worry."

"I had that Brenda," I reminded her. Luke had been all that and more. "It wasn't good enough. I don't want to have another one of those relationships."

Silence burned the line. "Hang in there kiddo," she said seriously. "There's time yet."

"Well," I said quietly, "it's possible that Jason could end up in Salem."

"Okay," she replied hesitantly. "There are some Nosferatu here."

"Shortly before we found Lena he said that we needed to talk when we got back, and then when we got back he disappeared." That had hurt me more than I cared to admit, even to Brenda. "I knew I needed to get to Salem, and I couldn't wait for him to decide to come back. Did I tell you about Robert?" I asked suddenly, remember how he had agreed to get me away from the holding without even asking why I had to go.

"Don't tell me you're bound to someone else now," she asked drolly.

"Only by blood," I told her with a smile.

Her response was exactly what I expected. "What!"

"He's my brother," I replied.

"Oh, okay," she said, relieved. Then she got confused. "Did Antonio embrace someone else?"

"No, he's actually my brother," I explained. "Apparently when I was a teenager living in Helena, my father didn't like what was going on and thought he'd killed him. He's a mage."

"Oh, really."

"Yeah, he's actually the reason we were able to go to Ramadan." I smiled as I remembered how I met him. "This guy walked up to me in the airport in New York out of the blue like he knew me and he kept calling me Tina. You know nobody calls me Tina, but this guy did, and he knew me. His name was Carl Canali, and I remembered a dream that I'd had a couple of nights before that with the whole thing about my father killing my brother."

"You've got some strange stuff going on," Brenda replied.

I shook my head. "You have no idea," I said wryly. "So I get to Paris and Robert was at the airport, which was kind of cool. And he went—did I mention he knows Graves?"

Brenda laughed. "He's a popular guy, isn't he?"

"Yeah," I ground out, "so popular I could just kill him."

"No," she warned, "that wouldn't be good."

"Bet me." I winced at the hard tone of my words, but couldn't bring myself to regret them.

"You wouldn't want that on your conscience," she said.

"What conscience?" I asked. All I wanted was to be in a locked room with a staked Graves for five minutes. Really, that was all I wanted in life. Well, that and Jason to be with me forever, but that was it.

"Chris," she admonished.

I sighed. "For the second time this evening, I'm going to say that we're not going to agree on Graves so let's just not discuss him."

"I don't even know the guy," she admitted, "but I just don't think it's a good idea for you to have a vendetta attitude toward this powerful price."

"If I stay out of his city--" I stopped, then said truthfully, "And the way I look at it, the son of a bitch owes me. He owes me." I believed that Graves was one of the primary reasons that Jason had left me after his embrace. Jason was very loyal to Graves, and if the man had told him to stay with me, Jason would have.

"Chris," Brenda said softly, "you can't change the past. You have to move on," she finished.

"Ah," I drawled, "but the future would be so much better without him in it."

"Chris, You never know what could happen," she told me. "Maybe you were close in another life."

"That could never happen," I told her. I simply hated him too much. "Never."

"Never say never," she warned me.

"That son of a bitch," I exclaimed softly. "I would die before I would be civil to him, there is no way I would ever feel any different."

She chuckled. "I would laugh if you were married in another life. You probably had, like, fourteen children."

"Oh, come on," I protested. "You know that children are something that neither one of us will ever have." I quieted at that reminder of what we had lost to gain our powers and knew it was time to change the subject.

"So, we got Lena back safely and Jason disappeared," I said before I heard a sob from the other end of the line. "Brenda? What is it?"

I could hear her crying plainly now and bit back my own tears. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," she whispered. "I'm fine."

"It's the whole children thing, isn't it?" I asked.

"You never think about it," she admitted, "until you think about it."

"Yeah, I know," I murmured, "and when you think about it...."

"It's already too late."

I took a deep breath and bowed my head. "I used to think that the only regret I had in my relationship with Jason was that I could never do that for him," I confessed. That had been before Malcolm had taken Jason from the monastery, before his embrace. Now I regretted most of all that I had not been able to find him before his life and his God had been ripped away from him.

Brenda was calming down. "I know what you mean only now I get it like double."

I chuckled. "Yeah, I bet," I told her. "Twice after sundown, twice at midnight, twice—"

"That's not what I mean," she chided.

"I know," I apologized. "I'm just trying to lighten the atmosphere."

She was silent for a moment, then asked, "Do you think I'm an awful person?"

"Oh, Brenda." She was talking about her sleeping with Rafael, when she still loved Michael. "Do you remember who I just spent the last two years with? Do you have any concept of what that relationship was?"

"No," she admitted, "I didn't really want to."

"Okay. Well, let me just guess where you are right now," I murmured thoughtfully. "You're in bed."

"I just woke up," she said defensively.

"He's probably there," I continued, "and according to my watch, you got up a few hours ago."

"Yeah," she admitted.

"Let's just say I was in a similar position about a month ago," I told her.

"You're not helping me," she replied wryly.

"Mmm," I said neutrally, "didn't help me much either." Tears filled my eyes and I couldn't hold them back. A sob broke past my lips and I covered my mouth to hold back the flood. I missed Luke so much that I could almost taste his lips on mine.

"Oh, no, Chris. Don't you do that," she scolded. "Don't do that, you're gonna make me too. You know I have a firm policy that I never let anyone cry alone."

I chuckled at her words, and gained some control over my emotions.

"It's gonna be okay," she told me. "He's gonna come here—"

"God, I hope not," I exclaimed. The last thing I needed was for Luke to come looking for me.

"Why?" she asked.

"Isn't that the reason I'm moving to Salem?" I reminded her. "To get away from him?"

"No, no, not him," she said, finally realizing I'd been talking about Luke. "I'm talking about the other one. You know, you really do have a lot more going on than I do."

"You have no idea," I told her matter-of-factly. "I was trying to tell you that I couldn't take it with Jason leaving like that without him talking to me when he'd said he wanted to when we got back. I didn't have time to wait for him to come back, so I asked Robert to get me out of the Holding, and he agreed. I left Jason a note and I basically told him that if Graves was more important to him than I was, that I didn't want to see him again."

"Oh," she said in a small voice.

"But I also told him that I'd be waiting," I added. I laughed harshly at myself. "Am I like a ditz or what? How many times am I gonna let this guy kick me in the ass?"

"Probably the same amount as I would," she responded, "which is like every night. If he could only have a smidgen...."

"Are you talking about Michael?" I asked softly.

"Sometimes," she said very softly.

"Rafael is there with you, isn't he? Perhaps we should speak of this when I get there," I told her.

"I would love that," she replied.

"I think we have two years to catch up on," I reminded her.

"And a whole year to do it in," she said. That was how long it would take for me to break the blood bond, as long as I had no contact with Luke.

I laughed. "Yeah."

She got serious suddenly. "There's probably something I should let you know about what you're walking into."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," she said quietly. "Sabbat."

The Sabbat are the bad guys of the Kindred community. "What about them?"

"They're here."

"Ooh, yippee," I whispered.

"Oh yes," she told me, "and guess who's with them."

I couldn't believe what she was implying. "You're not serious."

"I'm quite serious," she replied, her voice grave. "He talks to me as if he's being held by them, then it appears as if he's taken part in the torture of a local family. And someone I can only assume is close to him and with him tried to kill me."

"What?" That didn't sound like the Michael I remembered. He was more like the quintessential Ventrue, all business and suits.

"Almost killed Rafael in the process," she breathed softly. I heard her sigh.

"You'll have to tell me all about this when I get there," I said. "I know that Rafael is there and I don't want to put you in a difficult position, but we'll talk."

She laughed suddenly. "With the men around, this is going to be too bizarre."

"It's going to take some adjustments."

"God we're gonna be like crazed old ladies together," she told me. "We have way too many factors going on in our lives."

I sighed. "I think I've got one extra," I reminded her, thinking of Luke.

"Yeah," she said. "I'm glad I'm not in your shoes."

"I wish I wasn't," I breathed softly.

"Although—" she started to say, then seemed to think better of it. "I'll talk to you when you get here. Bye, Chris."

"Bye, Bren." I turned the phone off and put it back in my jacket. I would leave it off unless I needed to use it and would buy another phone as soon as I could. I wanted a cell phone that I didn't have to fear with every ring that Luke was on the other end.

I crawled toward the front of the wagon, and Robert joined me. I thanked him again for all of his help, and made sure that he had Brenda's number in Salem. I didn't explain why I was going there and, thankfully, he didn't ask.

He asked me to stay away from Papa, and I couldn't help but agree. I needed to see my father face to face and ask him about Robert, but I knew I wouldn't be going to the West Coast any time soon, and Papa really didn't have the funds for cross country travel.

We hugged and I wanted so badly to remember him, to know how I had felt about this stranger who was my brother. I sighed when he released me, knowing that if the memories were ever going to come back, they would have to do so on their own.

I turned to Frasier. "The sun will be coming up, so I have to get into the box," I told him. "Robert will help you. You'll be getting on the airplane when we reach it. We have to take the plane to get where I need to go, so you have to get on the airplane." When I had explained airplanes to him, he had been skeptical and sounded reluctant to fly.

"Are you trying to tell me I'm chicken?" he asked, pretending affront.

"No," I said honestly. "I'm trying to tell you that you won't be."

When he hesitated, I met his eye.

"You'll like the airplane," I told him, using my preternatural abilities to convince him without his knowledge or consent. I hated doing that to him, but I could think of no other way ensure that he got on the plane. I, of course, would be out of it completely, sleeping until the sun went down.

"All right," he replied with a grin.

"So we'll be getting there, and I'll be in the box sleeping," I turned to look at the box, dreading entering its dark recesses. "It's locked from the inside, so you can't open the box until I unlatch it. This is very, very important."

He nodded. "Okay." I was glad to see he was taking me seriously.

"I don't tan," I reminded him. "I burn." Literally.

"Oh," he said, pleased, "that's right, sun." His world had fried their ozone layer, and they now used artificial light for everything. Frasier had never actually seen the sun.

"Yes, it will be coming up shortly," I told him, feeling the draw of sunrise. "Actually really shortly, so I'm going to get in the box. Just listen to Robert and do what he tells you to do, and I'll see you when the sun goes down."

"Good night, Christina," he told me softly as he touched my cheek, an intense look in his eyes.

"Good night, O'Connell," I smiled in reply. I looked forward to showing him my world. I knew he would be good for me, and help me stay away from Luke, help me stay alive after Jason's second rejection.

I gave Robert a final hug and climbed into the box, pleased anew that Lena had thought to put a cushion in the bottom of it. I turned the locks and waited for sleep to claim me.

The breeze up here had a slight chill to it, but I didn't feel it. I had Marcus's leather jacket on to keep me warm, and the blanket he brought with him. Tonight Marcus and I had been going steady for a year.

He had packed a small picnic and the two of us rode up to Lookout Point to enjoy it. The view was breathtaking as the sun started to set over the city, but neither of us was really watching it. School didn't start for another few weeks, and with Malcolm and Lizzy out of town until Sunday, we had spent every free moment of the last week together.

Marcus hadn't been pushing for a more physical relationship, but I knew he wouldn't complain if we became more intimate. Tonight we I was thinking of doing just that. If Papa were to find out what I was thinking... well I refused to think about that.

After a few moments of cuddling, Marcus got up and headed to his bike saying he had something for me. When he returned, he was carrying a box wrapped in silver paper and tied with a red bow.

"Happy one year, Tina. I know we said we wouldn't get anything, but I had some extra cash and knew you'd like this," he said with a small smile playing on his lips.

"Marcus, I am going to kill you." I couldn't help but smile at how sweet he was. When he handed the gift to me I realized that it was quite heavy. I started opening the gift carefully, trying not to rip the paper.

"Just rip it! God you're annoying," Marcus cried as he sat down next to me still smiling. I stuck my tongue out at him playfully.

When I finally got the paper off, I discovered a brand new camera with telephoto lenses, variable shutter speed, the works. I'd been eyeing this model for quite a while, so I knew exactly how much it had cost him.

He interrupted my silence with, "Do you like it?" I responded by knocking him down and kissing him deeply.

"Of course I like it, but how did you save the money for this? It's too much. Take it back," I told him as I tried to hand the gift back to him, but he just held his hands up palm out.

"No, no. You're going to need some practice with some real equipment if you're going to get into a good program in college." He said seriously and I lowered camera, thankful that I didn't have to give it up.

I'd talked several times with both Marcus and Papa about going away to college. I already had a job lined up with the local paper once school started, but both of them wanted me to go on to collage and get a degree. I liked it better when they didn't agree on anything.

"Fine," I said in a teasing tone. "I'll take this, but we'll have to see about the school thing." I opened the box and took out each piece, inspecting it in the nearly non-existent sunlight. Marcus's voice cut into my inspection.

"Tina, we'd better get you home before your dad kills me."

"Not yet," I replied with a sly smile. "I haven't given you your present."

FRASER O'CONNELL

YOUR HAND IN MINE, I WILL BE BRAVE

TAKE ME FROM THIS EARTH

BLOODY KISSES (A DEATH IN THE FAMILY) - TYPE O NEGATIVE

When I woke in the box many hours later, I was quite disoriented. The dream I'd just had threw me for a few minutes. I could remember Lookout Point from my dream, remember going there with Marcus and Lizzy and her boyfriend Malcolm. Sometimes all of us would go, sometimes just a few of us. We'd hang out and sometimes we'd do magic. This was the first time I really had any memories of being a mage before my embrace, and it felt good to have something I could say that I knew for a fact.

And Marcus knew about the magic, I remembered that much. Had he been a mage too? Somehow I didn't think so, it seemed like he knew about the magic but wasn't involved in it. He'd stayed by me after my Awakening, when all of my other friends had ostracized me for joining the Goth group. To be fair, Billy had moved away, and Jane was a cheerleader. She didn't exactly blend with my new set of friends.

I couldn't remember exactly what kind of job Marcus had held, but I knew that he hadn't really had the money for the camera. He must have saved a long time for it, and even remembering that made me feel good inside. I wondered what had happened to him, if he'd missed me when I'd disappeared. If I was remembering correctly, Marcus was the reason I hadn't wanted to go to college, though if you'd have asked me about it at the time I'd have denied it completely.

It was quite a coincidence that I'd dreamed of someone named Malcolm when we'd just got done rescuing Lena from Lord Malcolm, the mage who'd abducted her from her home. It briefly crossed my mind that the two men were one and the same, then I discounted the possibility. I didn't remember what the Malcolm from my past looked like, but I didn't think my old friend would have been the kind of person to kidnap people from their homes.

I was so tempted to remain where I was until the plane landed in Salem. I would have been so easy for me to be swallowed by the emptiness that I felt inside, the gaping hole that had been my heart. Then I remembered Frasier.

I unlatched the lock and began to lift the lid, but strong hands grabbed it and removed it for me. I looked up to see Frasier standing over me with a grin.

"Morning," he said softly.

I gave him a small smile. "Morning, O'Connell."

He held his hand out to me and I took. He pulled me upright easily, then lifted me by my waist and stood me on my feet in front of him. "Sleep well?"

"Like the dead," I told him, my smile growing into a grin.

His hand brushed against my bare midriff where the shirt had ridden up. "You're cold, Christina," he said with a frown.

I shrugged and moved away from him. "I usually am when I first get up," I explained. "Once I've fed, I warm up a bit."

He grinned and I shook my head. "Oh, no," I said firmly. "I can't feed from you too often, you'd get weak and we can't have that, can we?"

"How often?" he asked, following me into the main compartment of the airplane.

I looked back at him, amused. "Liked it that much, did you?"

He leaned against the wall and watched me reach into the refrigerator for pint of blood. "You know I did." His deep voice sent ripples of pleasure down my spine.

I laughed. "I could probably drink from you every seven to ten nights," I replied to his question. "How about me drinking from you?" he asked.

I smiled, pausing in the act of opening the bag in my hands to look at him. "We talked about the blood bond, remember?" When he nodded, I said, "We can do the second drink tonight if you like, and the third tomorrow night. After that, you'll only need my blood once a month or when you've used to it do something."

He looked puzzled. "Like what?"

I turned away and took a long drink from the blood bag. It was cold, but heady. I crumpled the empty plastic and threw it down the waste shoot. "Remember when Jason walked through the monastery gate?" The gate had been locked, and we'd had get through it to save Lena.

"Yeah," he replied.

"You could do that using my blood." I stepped closer to him and reached out to squeeze his bicep. "You are already stronger than you were, but you can make yourself even stronger, faster," I told him. "You could also pick up some of my clan's disciplines."

"Disciplines?" he whispered, cupping his hand on my face.

I closed my eyes, enjoying the warmth of his skin. "Each clan has several gifts," I explained, looking up at him. "Tremere, my clan, have Auspex, which enhances our senses. At the lowest level we can hear, feel, taste, see and smell more than any other Kindred, or human."

Frasier ran his hand up into my hair. "That could have its advantages."

I smiled. "At higher levels, we can read people's auras, see visions from touching things, even read minds."

It occurred to me suddenly that I didn't have to miss Luke. I could sleep with Frasier and get what I thought I was missing. Would that be fair? Frasier knew I loved Jason, knew that Jason was the priority in my life. I had told him before we had left his world that it didn't matter if I ended up with Jason, that he would always be my soul. The most I could hope for was the ability to deal with loving him and living without him.

Frasier had told me he would take whatever I could give him. But what if I allowed myself a night with Frasier and Jason did come to Salem? I shook my head, reminding myself that it would never happen.

"Can you read my mind?" he asked gently.

"I don't have to use Auspex to read your mind, Frasier," I told him. I took his hand and led him to one of the nearby couches. "My Auspex isn't that well developed yet, but I can read auras, and I think I've figured out how Cormac was getting his visions from objects. I need to practice a little, but I think I have it."

"What else can you do?" he inquired.

"The second clan discipline is Dominate," I replied. "It can be used to... persuade people."

He smiled wryly. "Like talk someone into getting on an airplane."

"Yes," I admitted uncomfortably. "I did use it to convince you, but I had no choice. I promise not to use it on you unless it is absolutely necessary."

"I don't like the idea of you using it on me at all," he stated plainly.

"The third clan discipline is Thaumaturgy," I continued, ignoring his objection. "That is what allows the Tremere to do magic."

"You did mention magic," he murmured, his hand again going to my hair. "What kind of magic?"

"Most of what I know is blood magic," I told him. "I can tell things about people from their blood, or store blood in objects for later use. I also know many rituals that aid me in my nightly existence."

"You'll have to show me," he said in a distracted voice.

I glanced around the cabin for something to divert his attention and spotted my computer case standing on the floor a few feet away. I concentrated for a moment, and it lifted into the air and floated toward us.

Surprised, Frasier dropped his hand and caught it before it fell in his lap. "Whoa."

"I can do that, too," I chuckled.

He shot a startled glance at my face. "What else can you do?"

"My ex-boyfriend taught me how to see in the dark," I said. "I can also grow inch long claws on each of my fingers. Protean is not a discipline of my clan, but it can be learned. It's pretty cool."

Frasier's eyes widened. "Claws?"

I nodded.

"Would that ex-boyfriend be Jason or the other one?" he asked, looking back at the briefcase in his hands.

I reached over and opened the case, then took the computer out and set it on my knees. "Luke," I replied softly. I opened the laptop and turned it on. As I waited for it to boot, I reached back into the case for a telephone cord and hooked the modem to a jack in the wall.

"You don't like to talk about him, do you?" he asked.

I stopped my nervous movements and turned my full attention on Frasier. "You know the blood bond thing? Remember how I said one drink was a crush, two was like a serious relationship and three was like love?"

He nodded.

I looked away, longing and regret sweeping through my mind. "Due to... extenuating circumstances, I have drunk Luke's blood twice," I confessed reluctantly. "It is forbidden by my clan for any member to be bonded to anyone from another clan. Luke is Gangrel. We both could have both been killed, but my Primogen decided to show mercy on us both." Somehow I didn't feel that Idella had shown me mercy, but the anguish I felt now was surely better than Luke's death.

"It will take me at least a year to break the blood bond," I told Frasier in a soft voice, my head down. "During that time, I can't talk to him, see him, or hear from him in any way. If I do, I have to start my time all over again. I'm afraid if I can't do this on my own, my sire will kill Luke."

I could feel Frasier's gaze on my bent head and wondered what he must be thinking. "I told you that I've made many mistakes in my life," I reminded him. "That is the biggest one. Luke and I have always been friends, and I knew he wanted more from me. Then I met Jason." I shook my head. "When Luke, Lena and I were searching for Jason, Luke helped me survive. I didn't really know much about blood bonds until after I had taken the second drink from him, and then I couldn't bring myself to tell anyone because I knew what would happen."

"What's happening now," Frasier said.

"Yes."

"Do you want to be with Luke?" he asked me not unkindly.

"God, yes," I cried softly. "But I know that most of what I feel is the blood bond. I want to be free of it more than I want to be with him. Maybe if I break it, Jason—" I stopped and glanced at Frasier's face.

He smiled. "Maybe Jason will want you back."

I nodded. "I want Jason more than I ever wanted to be with Luke," I replied earnestly. "You should know that I left him a note when we left telling him that I would wait for him in Salem." I had also told him that if Graves was more important to him than I was, he should stay out of my life. Honestly, I expected him to stay out of my life.

"You told me before we came to your world how much you love him," Frasier reminded me. He put a finger under my chin and tilted my face to his. "I'll tell you again that I'll take whatever you can give me."

I smiled and nodded. "Thank you for being so understanding," I whispered.

He leaned closer. "You're welcome," he whispered back.

"You have things to learn," I reminded him, pulling away. "I can show you a few things on the Internet until we land if you like."

He glanced at the computer. "Is that an Internet?"

"No," I corrected him. "That's a computer. But I can get to the Internet from here. Do you want to feed first?"

His hot gaze shot down to my wrists. "You don't have to ask me twice," he drawled.

I laughed and gestured for him to put the case down while I set the computer aside. I allowed my fangs to drop and bit open a small cut on my wrist then held it out to him.

He took my hand almost reverently and raised it to his mouth. I felt his soft lips rest on my sensitive skin and his tongue move against the cut. When he drew my blood into his mouth, I leaned my head back against the headrest and floated in a sea of sensation.

After he had drawn about a pint of vitae from my body, I touched his hand. "Enough, Frasier," I whispered. He looked up at me over my wrist, and nodded. He released me slowly, running his tongue lingeringly over the wound.

Despite the blood I had lost, I felt warm. Frasier had seen me lick the wound closed the last time I had fed him, and now my tongue had to run along the same path his had traveled to close the wound. The taste reminded me of the kiss we had shared in his world. I mourned that Jason would forever stand between any other man and me in my heart.

His eyes fastened on my lips and a memory of the kiss we had shared rolled through my mind. I looked away, missing Luke and the closeness we had shared.

Frasier put his arm on the couch behind me as I set the computer back on my lap. I opened an Internet browser, making sure that Frasier saw and understood everything I was doing. He braced a hand behind me and leaned forward to watch my movements. After a few minutes I felt his lips on my cheek and I turned to look at him. I felt my body tighten when I saw the desire on his face.

"Are you paying attention?" I asked him.

"Yeah." He recounted the steps I had taken easily.

I shook my head, remembering his near photographic memory, and continued with my explanation. A few moments later, I felt him kiss my cheek again.

I turned to face him not sure what to say, but he didn't give me a chance to say anything. He brought a hand up to cup my cheek and kissed me tentatively.

I didn't know what to think, what to do. I felt isolated and afraid without Luke's familiar presence to keep me sane. I had hoped that things would work out with Jason, but when he had left the room at the holding without so much as a word, I knew exactly how little I meant to him. Yes, I had asked him to go to Salem, but I held little genuine hope that he would. I needed something real, someone strong to connect me to the world again so that I didn't space out completely as I had when Jason

had left me in San Francisco. Luke had been there to pull me back from the edge. Frasier was here for me now, but I wasn't sure how far I should let our relationship go.

When I didn't pull away, Frasier deepened the kiss. He blindly took the computer from my lap and sat it on the coffee table in front of us. Then he grabbed my knee and turned my body to face his. The kiss was not overwhelming in any way. I knew that he would stop any time I asked him to, but I also knew that this was what he wanted. He pulled me closer to him, then leaned me back on the couch until we were nearly lying down.

I felt his hands caress my back and I ran my hands up around his neck. I tangled my fingers in his hair and pulled him closer for better access to his mouth. Our tongues entwined sweetly, making my head spin with the taste of coffee and of my vitae. His heat was incredible, warming me completely.

His hands ran down my back until they cupped my buttocks and he lifted me toward him. I could feel his hardness against my thigh, and I moaned low in the back of my throat. I felt his hand raise my shirt and touch the skin of my back. The heated contact broke the spell he'd woven around me and I broke away, my lips wet from his kiss.

The color of his eyes had deepened to indigo and they fairly shone with passion. I silently debated the wisdom of what we had been about to do. If Jason came to Salem... as much as I had told myself that he wouldn't come, a part of me hoped—prayed that he would. I knew that I had to give him time to make his decision, time to find his way back to me, to us.

I closed my eyes and shook my head. "O'Connell," I whispered, "we can't do this, it's not right." He pulled away and sat up. "I'm sorry," he told me.

"No," I replied firmly, "it's not your fault, it's mine." I sat up and pulled down my shirt, then ran a hand through my hair.

Frasier shifted uncomfortably on the couch and I stood to walk across the room. "I'm sorry," I repeated, running a hand across my eyes and fighting tears. "This is my fault, I know better. We just can't do this."

He rose and came over to stand before me. I looked up at him and he put his hands on my upper arms. "Christina," he said soothingly, "I understand. I don't have to like it, but I understand that you have feelings for Jason that you're trying to deal with, and I'm not going to pressure you. We both know what I'm here for."

I tried to smile. "Yes," I whispered. He was there to help me deal, and to protect me. He was doing a pretty good job so far.

He grinned. "I'm gonna do whatever I need to do."

I couldn't hold back the sob that wracked my body. Frasier pulled me against the tartan on his chest and held me while I cried.

His hands rubbed my back. "It'll be all right, let it out," he soothed. He kissed my temple lightly. "I'm not going to let anything happen to you."

After what seemed like a long time but was probably only minutes, I finally calmed down. I put one arm around his waist, grateful that I had someone I could lean on, someone I could cry on. "I'm sorry," I told him.

"Don't worry," he replied, a smile in his voice. "I'm a big boy, I can handle this."

I realized abruptly that he was still aroused and couldn't contain a small laugh. "I bet you can," I said wryly.

His chest rumbled with contained laughter. "Yeah, I think I need to go handle something right about now."

I pulled back and looked up at him, half laughing, half-crying. He took one look at me and his hands came up to cup my face. It took me a moment to realize that he was concerned about the blood still falling from my eyes.

"It's the way Kindred cry," I reassured him, reaching up to wipe the tears away. "It's nothing."

He swept my hands aside and used a corner of his tartan to clean the blood from my face. "Everything will be okay," he told me again.

I nodded. "I know, it just takes time." But I really didn't believe my words. Two years hadn't been enough time for me to get over Jason. I didn't think there would ever be enough time for me to forget him.

"You gonna be okay?" he asked quietly.

"Yeah." I took a deep breath. "I'm just gonna to check with the pilot to see what time we're expected in Boston so I can let my sister know."

"Okay."

I walked away and didn't look back, but I could feel his eyes burning into my back.

HEATHROW AIRPORT

I NEED TO KNOW IF YOU WERE REAL

'CAUSE I'VE BEEN KNOWN TO GET IT WRONG

GIVE YOU BACK - VERTICAL HORIZONS

When I talked to the pilot, he was in the process of making the approach to Heathrow. He gave me the information I wanted, then asked me to see that Frasier and I were buckled in for the landing. Frasier seemed a little nervous as we landed, so I held his hand until we taxied up to the gate. It was a little after nine o'clock and we only had an hour or so before takeoff, so we decided to stretch our legs in the airport.

I went into the bedroom and dressed in the clothing I felt most comfortable in. Tight black jeans hugged my hips and tapered down into nearly knee high boots. A small Glock fit into a custom holder in the right boot. I kept silver bullets in that gun in case I came across werewolves who wouldn't listen to reason.

A dark blue tank top barely covered the lacy black bra I was wearing. I clipped the holster for my larger gun into the back of my waistband and slid the gun inside. I strapped a knife that had a high silver content to my right forearm and tested the draw of the blade. When I was satisfied, I picked up the heavy leather jacket that was my favorite and slipped it on.

The cross Jason had sent to me when he was embraced went on last and fell between my breasts. Inside the cross were fifteen crystals, two of which were empty. If I ran my finger across a crystal, the blood stored inside transferred itself to my body. It was an easy way to fill up after a battle and one that had once saved Luke's life.

I glanced in the mirror as I turned to leave the room but barely noticed my appearance. I knew that the way I dressed tended to be more casual than most Tremere, but by now it was second nature to me. I didn't even think about how very Gangrel my clothing made me look.

Just before we left the airplane, I remembered the strict rules airports had about weapons, and the metal detectors they used to find them. I turned to Frasier. "O'Connell, we can't go through the airport armed," I told him. "Security is very tight and it wouldn't be a good idea for us to be arrested. You don't have ID."

He shrugged. "Do you have someplace I could stash my bag?" He turned and looked around the main compartment.

"Yeah," I replied, turning. "There's a—" Frasier walked over to the couch we had sat on earlier and tripped a hidden switch. "—compartment under the couch," I finished needlessly.

He put his bag inside and the gun he had strapped to his thigh. I placed my pistols and the knife on top of his bag and he closed it, making sure that the secret switch locked the compartment.

We walked from the plane arm in arm. We found a clothing store with a limited selection and rather than try to explain modern closures, I quickly picked out a sweat suit for him. He liked the softness of the material, but other than that didn't seem interested in the clothing.

A few minutes later we were passing a newsstand when he paused and picked up a magazine. It was in some Middle Eastern language I couldn't read, but it looked like Frasier could. I watched him flip through the pages until he came to an article that interested him, then he chuckled wryly.

"Can you read that?" I asked quietly.

He glanced at me. "Yeah, can't you?"

I shook my head. "I can only read English and Russian," I told him.

"Oh," he replied, returning his attention to the magazine. "Arabic, beautiful language." He showed me a picture of an Egyptian artifact that had apparently been recently found in the desert near Cairo, then explained how the archaeologists had misinterpreted the inscription.

"It's the oldest form of the language I've seen," he told me when I asked if he were sure, "but still pretty straightforward."

I grinned. "Antonio is going to like you," I told him.

He shot me a puzzled glance. "Antonio? Who is that?"

"He's kind of like my father," I told him, "except he's not my father. He's not my sire, either, but he's my sire." I smiled at the confusion on his face. "If he were my true sire, he would be the man who made me what I am. Because I never knew who embraced me, Antonio adopted me."

"I see," Frasier replied, looking again at the article.

"He's into the old stuff," I added.

Frasier grinned. "Are you saying I'm old?" he asked with mock indignation.

"No, but this stuff is," I replied. "And Antonio is a bit older than you. Just a lot."

"Just a lot?" he asked. "How much is a lot?"

I shook my head. "Only a few hundred years," I said softly.

He frowned at me. "Why do prunes come to mind?"

I laughed. "No, dear, not Antonio," I corrected him. "When we get back on the plane, I'll show you a picture. I have one of Brenda, too."

He closed the magazine and put it back on the rack. "Does she look anything like you?" he asked. "I know you're not real sisters, but is there a resemblance?"

"Not at all," I told him. "Did you want that magazine? We could buy it."

He shook his head. "You don't have to do that." But I saw his eyes return to the publication.

"No," I said, picking it up, "but I'm interested in finding out what else they're wrong about."

He shrugged, pretending indifference.

"Well, we'll pick it up and that way if you want to read it later, it's there." I glanced at his face. "Maybe you can teach me Arabic. Or ancient Egyptian, or another language you know."

He grinned. "Take your pick."

I convinced him to let me buy him a few other publications, a Spanish newspaper and a French magazine. I looked for the Las Vegas newspaper I liked to read, but the stand didn't have one. I bought a New York Times and a London Times, then led Frasier to a nearby bookstore.

He went straight to the history section where we picked out several books on current events and world history. He mumbled something about there being no books on guns, but I led him to another section of the bookstore where he found plenty of them. He was like a child in a candy store and I loved watching it. He picked out three books on guns and after I paid for everything we returned to the plane.

LESSONS BEGIN

THIS IS NOT ABOUT TRYING TO GO BACK IN TIME

THIS IS NOT ABOUT WHERE I'LL BE A YEAR DOWN THE LINE

JUST ABOUT NOW - FAITH HILL

When we got on board, Frasier opened the secret compartment and handed me my weapons before taking out his bag. I sat down on the couch and was replacing them where they went when I noticed him standing on the other side of the low table watching me.

I put the Glock in its holster at my back and looked up at him curiously. "So, O'Connell," I drawled. "What's in the bag?"

He knelt down and sat the bag on the table.

"Just what I always wanted," I said facetiously, "a man on his knees before me."

He shot me an unreadable look. "Would you wish it, madam, that I remove your shoe and pay homage to you?" he asked formally.

I smiled. "Maybe later."

He grinned back. "I suck toes pretty good, too," he told me.

I laughed, then sobered. "No."

"I was going to show you what was in the bag," he said. "But you had to go and get all cocky on me."

My eyebrows shot up. "Cocky? Me?"

He picked up the bag. "Maybe you don't wanna know, maybe I'll just put it back."

"I wanna know," I replied seriously. "Put the bag down and show me. Please."

He raised his burden a bit. "This bag?"

"That bag."

"I'm thinking about making you pay for it," he said thoughtfully.

"You want me to pay in blood?" I asked him with a grin. "I could pay in blood if you like."

"Not tonight," he said.

We negotiated for several minutes for something he wanted. Finally he accepted a trip to a movie theatre for the latest Star Wars movie, complete with movie theatre popcorn.

I watched him undo several catches I hadn't noticed before on the bag. When he unrolled it, it was all I could do not to gasp. The leather held many compartments, neatly spaced and all full. There was everything from knives to guns in those compartments, including brass knuckles and what looked like a small crossbow. There were also many types of explosives and detonators. I recognized dynamite and plastique among them.

"Jesus," I breathed softly. "I thought Jason was the only one who packed this way."

Frasier glanced at my face. "It's good to see that your choice in men is at least consistent."

I chuckled wryly. "Yeah. Guns, religion, go figure."

"Is he suave and debonair like me too?" he asked.

I looked away. "He used to be," I told him quietly.

In a desperate bid to change the subject, I ran a finger down the barrel of what looked like a Desert Eagle. "What's this modification?" I asked. "Or is it a modification?"

He looked away, pretending ignorance.

I laughed. "Okay, it's a modification. What's it do?" When he didn't answer, I said, "Come on, share with mommy." He shot me a mocking glance and I laughed.

"That's something special," he told me. "I could show you what it is."

"You could," I repeated, "but will you?"

He sat back on his feet and crossed his arms. "You'd have to pay me for it," he said playfully.

I sat back and tapped a finger on my lower lip. "Let's see. What do you want from me, O'Connell? Besides the obvious. Is there chocolate on your world? Ice cream?"

He shrugged. "Yeah, whatever."

"I see that the food thing will get me nowhere," I commented. "I don't know what else to interest you with. You've seen the computer, and I think you found the television."

"Yeah," he said, sounding bored. "You're gonna have to start paying the big price now."

"I could teach you to drive," I offered.

He wasn't impressed. "Then who would watch our backs?"

I studied his face for a moment, unsure of just what he was going for. "What about the bullets I told you about," I asked, "the ones that explode?"

There was amusement in his eyes when he looked at me. "Show me one."

I reached behind my back and pulled out the Glock. I released the clip and took one of the bullets out, then realized that my gun looked different. "Did you clean my gun?" I asked him with a frown.

He tried to look confused. "What?"

"You did, didn't you," I accused playfully. "Why didn't you look at the rounds then?"

"What makes you think I didn't?" he asked with a sly look.

I shrugged and reloaded my weapon. As I put it back in its holster, he reached for a box in one of the pockets of his bag. When he tossed it to me, I opened it to reveal a box of bullets that seemed to be modified in some way. "What did you do to these?"

"I tried to make them like yours," he told me. "We'll have to see if they work."

"I'm afraid," I murmured dryly.

"So am I," he said as he took the box from me and put it back in its pocket, "'cause I'm not exactly sure what's going to happen when I fire these things. I want to try it out as soon as possible, I think they'll be cool, but I had to make do with what I had so they're a bit sloppy." He rattled off half a dozen chemicals that he thought he would need to match my bullets.

"I could get that stuff for you," I told him. "And look at the clothes and books I bought for you."

"Okay," he said, rising. "I'll pay you for them." He braced his hands on the table and leaned toward me.

I sat still, not sure of what he was going to do. He made a great show of leaning over, but at the last minute, kissed my forehead. I laughed.

"That's how you're paying me for the books and the clothes?" I asked, relieved. "How about I pay you for showing me your gun in the same way."

"You could have," he chuckled, "but you didn't offer that."

I shook my head. "I'm scared about offering you things, O'Connell."

"Why?" he asked, picking up the gun.

I didn't answer; I didn't want him to know how much he tempted me. He began to disassemble the modified weapon, explaining it to me in terms that were far over my head.

"Look, I've never taken a lesson in firearms," I protested. "Jason showed me how to load a gun and how to shoot it, but that's about it." I almost laughed at the appalled look on his face.

"No wonder those things were in such bad shape. You know, you do need to clean them once in a while," he chastised.

"Luke tried to get me to," I admitted with a shrug, "but I just didn't know how."

He sat the gun down softly, cringing.

"I told you I needed you, Frasier," I said softly.

He sighed deeply. "Okay, you're gonna learn," he told me firmly. He explained the weapon in very basic terms, ignoring my protests that I was not in Kindergarten. By the time he was done explaining and had made me take apart and reassemble the gun, I could have done it in my sleep. Then he started talking about the modification he had made.

He showed me a fingerprint sensor near the bottom of the stock that was positioned exactly for his left pinky. "This acts something like an infrared sight," he told me, "except it's a laser. From what I found on your Internet, your world isn't ready for this, so we need to keep the fact that I made it a secret, I don't want to be responsible for handing this type of technology to a society that's not ready for it."

I agreed.

"I'm actually quite glad that I had the foresight to add the print activation," he added. "I must have known I would need it for something." With that, he took a square device from another of the pockets and pressed a few buttons. Then he asked me for my left hand.

"What are you doing?" I asked, my hand now held firmly in his.

"I'm going to enable the mechanism to recognize your print," he said, concentrating on the square device he was holding over my pinky. "Just in case something happens to me, you will at least have this weapon to protect yourself with."

I didn't like the sounds of that; I was growing fond of Frasier. "We'll just have to make sure that nothing happens to you," I told him.

He glanced up for a moment. "Things aren't always guaranteed."

"I know quite well that nothing is guaranteed," I whispered under my breath thinking of Jason.

He hit a few more buttons, then let go of my hand. He inserted the square into the stock, then waited for the whirring noise to stop. When it was done, he removed the device, turned it off and returned it to its pocket. He held the gun out to me stock first, but pulled away when I would have taken it with my right hand. I obediently held out my left, but reminded him that I am right handed.

"We just need to verify this worked," he replied. He placed my pinky over the pad and we both heard a quiet click. "That sound means it's activated."

I touched the pad and heard it click again. "Works for me."

He took the gun back and placed it in its holster, then began to roll the bag back up. "This is your nest egg," he told me. "Don't be like a badger and be bad with it."

I smiled. "O'Connell, that's what I have you for. You can play with the toys. We'll just have to see what we can do about finding you more."

He glanced up briefly. "You know, I did see some things I liked."

I studied him for a moment. "You can buy things from the Internet," I mentioned casually.

He head snapped up. "Really?"

"Yeah," I replied with a grin. "Remind me to get you a credit card once we get settled, then you can buy whatever you need."

Frasier asked about Kindred so I told him about clans. I went into detail about the Tremere, telling him about our rituals and hierarchy. I explained that clan came first to all Tremere, and that because a clan member with much higher standing than I had ordered me to Salem I was going without an argument.

I knew quite a bit about the Gangrel, Luke's clan. I explained that many Gangrel didn't know who their sire was, and that training for neonates was often very little or nothing. When I described their disciplines, I stumbled over some of the things I had seen Luke to, such as melding with the earth and calling animals to his side.

"Does Luke like guns?" Frasier asked overenthusiastically.

I glanced at him, unsure of what he was digging for. "Yeah, but not as much as you do."

"Is he a nice guy?"

"Yeah," I said softly, looking away. When Frasier didn't ask me anything more, I moved on to the Nosferatu clan. During the past two years, I had cultivated a friendship with Jora, a young Nosferatu in Vegas. While she hadn't given me every detail about her clan, she had told me a few things. Things like Animalism, the discipline they shared with the Gangrel. I had known about Obfuscate, but she had explained what the different levels allowed a Nosferatu to do.

Spending time with Jora and a few of her clan mates had allowed me to acclimate myself to their deformities. Beneath their horrific appearance, I had learned that the Nosferatu were still decent people, no better or worse than any other Kindred. My friendship with Jora was probably one of the big reasons I had been able to look at and touch Jason without disgust.

Frasier listened to everything I said about Jason's clan and asked pointed questions, many of which I didn't have the answer for. I told him everything I knew hoping it would allow him to interact better with Jason when, well, if he joined us in Salem.

I knew a few things about the Ventrue, such as their feeding limitations, from my friendship with Estrea. Talking about her clan made me miss her and I made a mental note to call her when things settled down in Salem.

I didn't know very much about the other Camarilla clans, the Malkavian, the Toreador, or the Brujah. Frasier seemed interested in the warlike ways of the Brujah, but I hadn't had enough exposure to the clan to go into much detail for him.

I'd saved the most important information for last. "The vast majority of humanity does not know we exist," I told him. "They cannot find out that we exist. If they did, they would hunt us even more than they do."

"They hunt your kind?" he asked with a frown.

"Yes," I replied gravely. "There is a group that calls themselves the Society of Leopold, but they are really the modern incarnation of the Inquisition that killed thousands of innocent people and supernatural creatures during the middle ages. My father was a member of that group, as was Jason before he met Graves."

Frasier looked surprised.

"I was quite surprised, too," I told him. "I'd had no idea who my father was until I saved Jason from an Inquisition meeting one night. That was when I found out he was human, I'd thought he was Kindred because of the strength of Graves' blood." Jason had been Grave's ghoulish at the time.

"You have quite an extraordinary family," he murmured.

"Yes, it's something else," I said sadly. "Robert told me that Papa tried to kill him because of his abilities."

"Do you have any memories of your mother?" Frasier asked. "Was she something interesting as well?"

"From what I understand," I told him, "she was like Robert." I had also been told that Papa had been involved in her death as well, but I didn't say that to Frasier. I had to look Papa in the eye and ask him before I believed it, no matter how much I wanted to trust Robert.

"She was a magic user?"

"A mage," I said softly. "I really don't remember very much before my embrace. A few images of Papa, some dreams my brother tells me really happened. Tell me about your childhood."

Frasier told me about growing up in Inferno with his brother and sister. His mother was very protective, and eager to lead her children down paths she believed were best for them. She wasn't always right, but she meant well at least.

His mother had convinced him to enter the Brotherhood of Everlasting Peace when he was eighteen. He had studied extensively at the Monastery, learning the many languages he spoke and much about the history of his world. Then, six months ago, Lord Malcolm had brought Lena into the monastery. Women were forbidden from entering the hallowed grounds, and her presence there went against everything the monks had taught Frasier. He had walked away and not looked back.

He'd taken various jobs for the next few months, then just happened to be assisting an instructor at Inferno's largest university when I had walked through the outdoor classroom. Later that afternoon we had met and talked, and he had shown a fascination with both my world and me. He'd been more than eager to come with me and be my willing ghoul. The fact that my life was dangerous only made joining me more attractive to him.

Frasier asked about the pictures I had promised to show him, so I pulled them out of the computer case and handed him Antonio's first. He was amazed.

"He doesn't look like he's over five hundred years old, does he?" I asked quietly. "Not even a day over three fifty. He's a bit older than he looks," I said wryly.

"Yeah," Frasier breathed in awe.

"That's why I said he likes the old stuff," I added. "That was his childhood." I handed him Brenda's picture.

"She's pretty," he said appreciatively.

"Yeah." She was, it didn't bother me to admit it.

He looked at me pointedly. "She's not as beautiful as you are," he said seriously. When I rolled my eyes, he said, "You are beautiful."

"Yeah, uh-huh." I attributed his opinion to the partial blood bond; I thought Luke was pretty good looking too. "Do you want me to show you the Internet now?"

"Sure."

I took Frasier on an Internet tour that lasted until about an hour before dawn. He asked me pertinent questions about American culture and world politics and I answered as best I could, showing him a few places he could search for information. He picked it up fairly easily, and soon I was able to leave him to his surfing.

I went into the airplane's surprisingly large bathroom and started the shower. This was the first chance I'd had to be alone since we'd left the Holding over twenty-four hours earlier and I knew I needed it. I let the water wash over me and remembered the horrible moment in Lena's living room when I had turned around and found Jason gone.

So much had happened over the last week, the least of which had been seeing Jason for the first time since he'd left me in San Francisco two years ago. He seemed to have adjusted to his life as Kindred, and he'd learned how to hide the deformities his embrace had wrought on him. The guise had been perfect until I'd pissed him off. At one point he had lost it completely and it had taken everything I had not to break down and cry at the loss of his mortal beauty.

Still, we had found time to talk while we were searching for Lena in Ramadan. He had apologized for leaving me in San Francisco, and I had begged forgiveness for not finding him before Lord Malcolm had forced his embrace. But Jason was as he always was, flippant to cover his unease, unwilling or unable to talk seriously about our relationship.

I remembered a portion of the letter I had left for him. I tried everything I could to get over you, Jason, and nothing helped, I had written. 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. The look in Luke's eyes had been enough to break my heart. 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. Jason had given me a wedding ring as part of a disguise we'd been using just before Malcolm had abducted him. Until I had left the Holding, I had kept that ring with me every night for the last two years. 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 leaned against the shower wall and let the blood tears spill from my eyes. I didn't know what I would do if Jason decided that Graves was more important to him than I was. I supposed I would endure in some fashion or another. Two long years had already passed while I waited for him, how would I live through the uncounted decades or centuries to come? Time stretched out before me like an endless void that I knew I would have to fill somehow.

The sudden realization that for years I had let myself be defined by my relationships took me by surprise and I was disgusted with myself. I knew I should never have let that happen. I was an independent person, and I had lived for years without depending on anyone. Well, perhaps I'd counted on Antonio in the beginning, but that had been entirely different. He had found me on the streets of Vegas, starving and alone, and taken me in. Antonio had been my salvation; he had guided me into the world of darkness and put my feet on the path to finding myself. He had never eclipsed my life.

I didn't like to think that I was the type of woman who lived for a man, but that was exactly what I had done, first with Jason, then with Luke. I had turned myself into a spineless wimp, and for what? Love? I had to face the facts; Jason didn't love me and as much as I wanted to, I didn't love Luke. It was past time for me to rely on myself again, to regain the inner strength that I'd called upon before I met Jason. It was past time for me to get on with my life.

I turned in the water for a final rinse, then shut the faucet off. After drying myself, I dressed in Jason's pajamas. I threw on a robe and went to stand in the doorway to the main cabin watching Frasier. He was so engrossed in the computer that he didn't see me at first. When he did notice me, he smiled.

"It's almost dawn," I told him. "Don't stay up too late, you need your beauty sleep."

He grinned. "I won't."

"Please stay on the plane today, O'Connell," I asked softly. "I don't want you to get lost in Boston. When the sun goes down, we'll head for Salem."

"Sure," he agreed. "I've got plenty to read and the whole Internet to surf."

I nodded.

"You look tired yourself," he told me. "Get some sleep, I'll watch over you."

I smiled. "Not literally, I hope."

"Sleep well, Christina," he said softly.

"Good night, O'Connell," I replied. I closed the door and laid down on the bed.

I tried to think positive thoughts about Salem, but I just couldn't do it. The prince, hell, the whole clan was irate that I hadn't told anyone about my blood bond to Luke. The Sabbath was in town, and Jason was probably on his way back to California by now. The only things I had to look forward to were seeing Brenda again and teaching O'Connell about my world. Oh, and spending the next year getting over my blood bond to Luke.

I fell asleep thinking about the men in my life. I dreamed of them.

PREPARATIONS

I FEEL LIKE I'VE BEEN LOCKED UP TIGHT

FOR A CENTURY OF LONELY NIGHTS

GENIE IN A BOTTLE - CHRISTINA AGUILERA

I was standing in the main cabin of the airplane with Frasier's arms around me. I put my hand on his cheek and his lips lowered to brush against mine. He deepened the kiss until we tasted each other. Our tongues entwined sweetly, making my head spin. I felt his hands under my shirt, caressing the skin of my back gently.

I tangled my fingers in his hair and stood on tiptoe to gain better access to his mouth. His hands ran down my back until they cupped my buttocks and he lifted me off the ground. I could feel his hardness against my stomach, and I moaned low in the back of my throat.

I grabbed his shoulders and brought my legs up until they were wrapped around his waist. He held my body against him with one hand while the other rose to cup my breast. His skin was heated and it warmed me to the core, reaching places inside of me that I hadn't realized were frozen. Then his skin cooled and I realized that my hands were running through long silky hair.

I broke away and stared at Luke, my lips wet from the kiss. His cat's eyes shone brightly, reflecting the dim light of the room. I saw myself there in his eyes, desire plainly written on my face. Elated, I wrapped my arms around his neck and pulled him close for a searing kiss. I was lost, drowning in the sensations I felt.

He laid me down on the bed in the back compartment of the airplane. His hips pressed closer to me, and I arched against him. His hands circled my waist, then pulled my shirt from my pants and pushed it up my ribcage. He broke the kiss to pull the shirt over my head, then looked down at the white skin of my breasts, covered only with black lace. He ran a finger along the lace, tracing the edge on my skin.

I watched the fascination on his face and gave a husky laugh. I pulled his shirt from his pants and raised it over his head. I ran my hand along the muscular lines of his chest, pausing over the nipples and enjoying the feel of his hair on my palms.

He found the clasp between breasts and released it deftly. I shivered when I felt his hands on my bare flesh and pulled him down to kiss me again. We kissed and touched while removing the rest of our clothes. His hands were like a cold fire on my body, igniting a passion only he could satisfy.

I closed my eyes and pulled him down on top of me. I felt his hardness enter my yielding body, the brush of long hair on my skin. Luke knew just where to touch me, just how to move to make me want to scream with need. I felt his teeth sink into my neck and as he drank I found the peak of desire once, then again before he collapsed on top of me and licked the wound closed.

I rubbed my temple against his forehead and breathed his name into his ear while I felt my body relax completely beneath him.

He turned my face to his and kissed me once more. "I love you," he whispered.

I wanted so badly to tell him that I loved him too, but I had never been able to lie to him. I closed my eyes and tried to block out thoughts of Jason. I had always tried to keep our bed free of the man I loved, but his memory found it's way between us, every time.

Weariness swept over me, one that had nothing to do with what we had just done. Luke rolled to his side, taking me with him and I pulled the blanket over us both. He pulled me close to his side and kissed my hair. I rubbed my cheek on his shoulder and sighed.

Almost, I stopped myself from wishing he were Jason. Almost.

Suddenly I realized that the smooth body pressed so closely to mine was generating a great deal of heat. Kindred don't generate heat. I raised my head and looked into Jason's face with shock.

He smiled at me and tugged my head back down on his shoulder. "It's almost dawn, Christina," he whispered. "Sleep now, I'll watch over you."

I knew I had to be dreaming, Jason was Kindred now, and Nosferatu. His skin was no longer smooth and warm to the touch. It should have been cool and rough, the way it was when I had touched him in Ramadan. The Jason who held me so tenderly now was human. I closed my eyes and listened to the quiet sound of his heart beating.

I woke to tearstains on my pillow. The plane was parked on a runway in Boston and I was alone in the cabin. I closed my eyes briefly, vividly remembering the dream I'd just had.

A light knock came at the door.

I pulled the gun from beneath my pillow, then rose and put a robe on over the pajamas. "Come in," I called softly as I slipped the gun in the pocket of the robe. I knew Frasier was supposed to keep watch, but anything could have happened while I slept.

Frasier opened the door and entered the cabin hesitantly. "Morning," He said softly.

"Morning, O'Connell," I replied nervously. I decided the best thing to do would be to forget the dream and go back to business as usual. "Did you sleep well?"

He grinned. "I slept quite well."

"That's good," I told him. I noticed the razor stubble on his face and reached out, only to stop short of touching his cheek. "We need to find you a razor," I said softly.

"I thought about using your knife," he said with a smile, "but it wasn't sharp enough and I didn't know if you wanted me to sharpen it for you." His hand came up and rested on my waist.

"There are better things to shave with in this world," I told him. "But you know you can take care of any of my weapons, any time."

His grin got wider. "Any of them?"

I smiled and nodded. "I don't have that many of them right now, but I'm sure you'll remedy that."

"Sure," he agreed.

"I assume we're in Boston?" I asked.

"That's what the pilot told me before he left," Frasier replied.

"I hope you weren't too bored today." I knew it must have been hard for him to be confined on the airplane, but I didn't want to lose him when I'd just found him a few days before.

"I did a lot of reading," he told me. "The Internet is a veritable fountain of information."

"Don't believe everything you read," I cautioned him with a smile. "If you have questions about anything, ask me."

"Sure." He glanced at his watch. "What time did you want to head out?"

I looked at the clock on the bed stand. It was just after six o'clock. "Let me get dressed and we can get out of here."

"Okay." He stood waiting expectantly.

I laughed. "Out," I told him with mock fierceness.

He grinned and strode from the room, closing the door softly behind him.

I dressed quickly in a dark gray pantsuit. The only jewelry I wore was the cross and the bracelet Robert had given me before his 'death'.

Frasier and I disembarked and found a brand new red Mustang convertible waiting for us on the runway. I smiled and silently thanked Brenda for her thoughtfulness. I had given my 1968 Mustang to Nina when I'd left Las Vegas, not wanting to deal with the memories I had of Luke and the car.

I put the top down while Frasier examined the trunk, this being the first car he had seen close up. I showed him how our luggage fit inside, then how to open the door and fasten his seat belt. I got in, started the car, and sat listening for a few minutes to the high performance engine. I showed Frasier how to tune the radio and soon we were on our way.

I realized that I couldn't take Frasier to see the prince in a dirty kilt or in sweat pants, so I turned my cell phone on to call Brenda. I thanked her for the car and let her know that we would probably arrive in Salem in about two hours, just long enough to find clothing for Frasier and make the drive up the coast. She gave me directions to the prince's home and told me she'd be waiting for us.

The number of cars on the freeways amazed Frasier. He didn't even notice the buildings until I pulled into the parking lot of a large department store. He stood and stared so long at all the cars in the lot that I had to take his hand and lead him inside of the store.

We walked through the men's department examining the selection. I picked out a few things and handed them to him, then took him to the changing rooms where I waited outside. He seemed to be taking a long time and I had just begun pacing when I heard him call my name.

"Yeah?" I called back.

A moment later, he replied, "I need some help."

"Yeah," I told him. I looked at the clerk. "He's used to kilts, I'm going to have to...."

"Of course," the man replied.

"Unless you would like to...?" I said hopefully.

"Oh, no" he told me. "You go right ahead."

"Okay." I went into the changing room area and knocked on the booth Frasier was in. He turned the knob, and opened the door. When I caught a glimpse of him naked holding a pair of jeans in front of him, I turned and closed the door quickly. I stood facing away from him, thankful that the booth was a fairly large one.

"First the underwear," I told him, peeking hesitantly for the boxer shorts I had picked out. I grabbed up the boxers and handed them to him. "Here, put these on."

Frasier turned to put on the shorts and I studied the view. He was very fit, muscular, and tanned. For a moment I almost regretted not sleeping with him as he bent to put his leg in the boxers and his buttock brushed against my hip. I remembered the heat of his skin in my dream and had to stop myself from reaching out to see if he was as warm as I had dreamed. I raised my eyes to the mirror and saw him watching me.

"Okay," he said, grinning.

I turned and reached blindly for the jeans. I showed him how they went on and buttoned the top button of the fly to show him how it was done.

"Do that again," he said, not really seeing it the first time.

I unbuttoned and refastened the button while he watched carefully. Then I showed him on the button of my jeans.

"Do that again," he repeated with a mock leer.

I laughed. "No."

I reached for the shirt I had picked out and helped him with it. It buttoned up the front, and I made a mental note to pick out several pullover shirts to make things easier for him until he adjusted to the clothing of my world.

The shoes I had found for him weren't comfortable, and the pants were a little too tight, although I liked how they fit. With some help from the clerk, we were able to find everything in his size. We purchased enough clothing to last him about a week, including a pair of dress shoes and three pairs of the sneakers he liked so much. Thank God for American Express.

We moved from the men's to the women's department. I quickly found several outfits in my size and added them to the purchases we were making. I took a side trip through the toy department, picking up an expensive video game system and several shoot-em-up games for it, looking forward to showing Frasier how they worked when we had some free time in Salem.

After we left the department store, I drove the Mustang through a McDonald's drive through. Frasier loved the chocolate shake and the French-fries, but he hated the hamburger. It was so much fun to watch him discover everything new about my world, as I had known it would be. I actually counted on it to help me get through the next few months.

SALEM AND THE PRINCE

TIMES HAVE CHANGED AND TIMES ARE STRANGE

HERE I COME, BUT I AIN'T THE SAME

MAMA, I'M COMING HOME - OZZY OSBOURNE

We arrived in Salem around eight o'clock. I followed the directions quite easily to the largest home I had ever seen. It was so big it almost looked like a hotel.

"This is it?" Frasier asked.

"Yeah," I breathed. "It's a little bigger than Elvira's last house."

Elvira had lived in a much smaller house on Elm Street, but had recently finished the construction of this one. From what I understood, it had taken nearly two years to complete to her satisfaction. The new quarters also housed the Tremere Chantry and had rooms ready for all of the Salem Tremere if they needed accommodations. From what Brenda had told me, only six of my clan members chose to live there permanently, but because of the Sabbat invasion, I assumed all Tremere would be staying there for the duration.

I pulled the car into the drive and around the fountain to park near the front stairs. A tall blond ghoul I didn't remember from my last visit walked around the car and opened my door for me. As I murmured my thanks, I saw Frasier looking at the inside of the door, then shrug and hop out of the car.

The man introduced himself as Jax, and asked if I had luggage. I told him I did and he assured me he would see that our things were taken to our rooms. I thanked him, glad that Brenda hadn't taken things upon herself to see that Frasier and I shared a room.

I walked to Frasier's side and took his hand, more needing his support than giving him mine. We went up the steps together, and another ghoul opened the door for us into a large two-story entry. I barely had time to register the size and tastefulness of the room when I spotted Brenda at the top of the stairs.

"Christina!" she exclaimed cheerfully as she bounded down the stairs away from the tall dark haired man who had been walking with her.

I let go of Frasier's hand and met her at the bottom of the stairs. "Brenda," I whispered as she enfolded me in her arms. I hugged her tightly, feeling as if I'd come home at last. I bit back the tears that sprung to my eyes, telling myself that there would be plenty of time for crying later.

She held me at arms length and looked me over. "How are you doing?" she asked.

I smiled. "Better," I told her. "Better."

I turned and motioned for Frasier to join us. "Brenda, this is Frasier O'Connell," I told her. "Frasier, this is my sister, Brenda Thompson."

She studied him carefully for a moment, then held her hand out. "Frasier."

"Miss Thompson," he murmured as he kissed the back of her hand.

From the corner of my eye I saw that Brenda's friend had joined her. He gave Frasier a hard look, earning a grin from the man at my side.

Brenda turned and smiled brightly her friend, and I could read a deep affection in his eyes for her. She hooked her arm through his and introduced him as Rafael Brown, her new 'assistant.'

I shook his hand as I covertly watched his reactions to Brenda. He seemed to be in tune with her, completely. I smiled. "It is good to meet you, Rafael," I told him. "It is time my sister found someone to... help her out."

Brenda introduced Frasier to Rafael, and they seemed to size each other up. When Frasier put his hand on the small of my back, Rafael seemed to relax somewhat.

Suddenly Brenda's smile turned false and her eyes grew big.

Chris, I heard in my mind, I thought you said you were just ghouling him?

I turned to look at Frasier. *I did, why?*

Then why does his aura look like he's Kindred?

Shocked, I looked at his aura myself.

"What, do I have a bugger on my nose?" Frasier asked me in a worried undertone.

"No," I told him, then turned to Brenda. "I have no idea why his aura is pale, Brenda," I said quite honestly. "It wasn't like that when we were in Ramadan."

We both looked at him again, studying the pale aura. He was confused, worried, and from his aura, looked Kindred. Brenda and I glanced at each other and said simultaneously, "How'd that happen?"

Brenda shook her head. "We'll worry about that later. Right now, Elvira is waiting." She turned and led us down the hallway to the left of the stairs.

As we walked, I started to get nervous. Elvira knew I was partially blood bonded to Luke, and because of that I wasn't sure how she would receive me. I knew my biggest mistake was not the blood bond itself, but the fact that I hadn't told anyone about it.

"Don't worry, Chris," Brenda whispered to me as we approached the closed door. "Elvira is a fair person."

"She didn't sound real fair when you were on the phone with me the other night," I told her, trying to swallow my nervousness.

"Well, there are certain things that you have to show force in," Brenda replied.

I nodded apprehensively. "I'm afraid this is one of them."

Brenda stopped and took my hand. "Chris, we understand that this is something you didn't mean to happen," she told me comfortingly. "You have nothing to fear. You know what has to be done."

I closed my eyes briefly. "I know."

"You know that there are lessons to be learned from this situation," she continued. "You also know that you have to admit you were wrong and that you understand you made mistakes."

When I nodded, Brenda smiled and walked to the sitting room door. She knocked, and a voice called out for us to come inside. Brenda opened the door and Rafael followed her in.

I was comforted by the feel of Frasier's hand in the small of my back as we entered Elvira Van Dorn's sitting room. Like the rest of the house, the room was large, and it had several different seating areas around the room. The prince was sitting in a tall-backed chair near the fireplace, with a handsome blonde Kindred seated to her left and a Tremere I recognized as Micky George.

Brenda stepped forward to bend over Elvira's outstretched hand and kiss her ring, then bent closer to whisper in her ear. Elvira shot a probing look at Frasier, and I knew she was checking his aura. I was glad Brenda had seen it first and could warn the prince. I didn't want to be in trouble for bringing a newly embraced Kindred to a strange town, especially if that's not what I was doing.

Rafael also bent over the prince's hand, and she looked at him with appreciation. I had to admit that Brenda's choice in men was pretty good, but I thought that Jason had been more handsome when he was human. I chased that thought away and turned my attention to Elvira.

"My prince," Brenda said clearly, "This is my sister, Christina Strong, and her assistant, Frasier O'Connell."

I stepped forward and took her hand in mine, bending to kiss the signet ring on her middle finger. "My prince," I said with the utmost respect for her in my voice, "I thank you for inviting me to your city, and for allowing me the opportunity to train at such a prestigious chantry."

She acknowledged my words with a brief nod and returned her hand to her lap. "It is good to see you again, my childe," she told me graciously, reminding me of our first meeting just after she had taken over the city. "If you need anything, please let me know."

"I will, my prince," I replied.

"And if you have any... impulses, be sure to let me know of those as well," she added, her honeyed tone doing little to hide the steel beneath her words.

"I have done well with my impulses so far, my prince," I told her, shifting uncomfortably on my feet.

"I assume you will be changing your cell phone number?" she asked.

I gave her a weak smile. "I had planned on getting a new one altogether, my prince, and having O'Connell carry it for me."

She nodded. "Wise decision. May I have your old phone?"

Without hesitation I pulled it from the inside pocket of my jacket and handed it to her. "As you wish, my prince."

She accepted the telephone from me and gave it to Micky, who took it silently. He stepped toward the fireplace and tossed it into the fire. The odor of burning plastic quickly filled the room.

"And this is your assistant?" Elvira prompted, ignoring her childe's movements.

I forced myself to look away from the flames and stepped aside to bring Frasier forward. "This is Frasier O'Connell, my prince."

Frasier took Elvira's hand and kissed her ring. "Madame," he said in his low seductive voice.

She smiled. "Welcome to my home, Frasier," she told him pleasantly, "and our world. I hope you will find everything you need here."

"Thank you," he replied with a grin. "I'm sure Christina will provide everything I need." He stepped back beside me.

"This is the Alden Monroe, the Tremere Primogen of Salem," Elvira said to both of us. "He will also be available if you need anything, and he will also aid you if you have any... urges." The last was directed toward me.

I bowed toward him respectfully, and he nodded at me.

"I don't live here at the chantry," he told me, "but you can get my address and phone number from Elvira. Ford Radek, the chantry Regent, is very interested in meeting you when you get a free moment. He is staying with me for the time being."

"Of course," I said softly, wondering why the Regent wasn't living at the chantry. I made a mental note to ask Brenda about it later.

"There are certain areas of the house that your assistant will not be allowed in," Elvira informed us. "Ghouls are only allowed on the second floor of the library if they are accompanied by their domitor or one of the higher ranking Tremere in the city. Some areas of the basements have the same restrictions, while others are off limits completely. Perhaps Rafael could show Frasier around tomorrow afternoon."

Rafael gave Elvira a small bow. "Of course, my prince."

She looked at Frasier meaningfully. "You don't want to know what the punishment is for being found in a restricted area of the house, my boy," she told him.

Frasier glanced at me, but I looked away. This wasn't my house, and these weren't my rules, but he had to live by them or die.

"I understand, my prince," he answered her gravely.

"I believe you remember Micky George," Elvira said to me. "I will give you and Brenda the evening to catch up, but tomorrow night you and Frasier will be working with Micky to solve the Sabbath trouble we have had recently. Idle hands are the devils play toys."

Frasier was nearly hopping on his feet with excitement at the mention of trouble. I looked at him pointedly, then down at his feet. He grinned unabashedly, but stilled.

I turned to the prince. "We are more than ready to give whatever aid is required, Mistress Van Dorn," I told her. "I would welcome the opportunity to keep busy."

She nodded, apparently pleased with my behavior. "Good. Micky will walk you out and make arrangements to meet with the two of you tomorrow evening. I'm sure that you have a lot to catch up on with your sister."

With a last glance at the smoldering remains of my cell phone, I turned and followed Brenda and Rafael to the door. Frasier's hand returned to the small of my back. We stepped into the hall and Micky followed, closing the door behind him.

He turned and gestured toward the entry. When we all started walking forward, he said, "I planned on doing a little reading in the library after sundown," he told me. "I thought you could join me there at seven o'clock."

"That would be fine," I told him.

"If you need anything, please let me know and we'll see what we can arrange for you," he offered.

Frasier leaned down and whispered in my ear. "Bullets."

I glanced up at him and smiled, then turned to Micky. "Actually, Mr. George—"

"Micky," he corrected.

"Micky," I repeated. "Is there a firing range on the grounds? O'Connell would like a chance to test bullets made in our world." I didn't mention that he had made the ammunition after coming to our world.

"Of course," Micky replied. "We have a range in the basement. Rafe will be able to show him where it is."

I could almost feel the anticipation radiating off Frasier. "Thank you," I told Micky.

"Brenda," he asked her, "how are things going?"

She smiled and I remembered that Brenda was fond of this Tremere. "Fine, Micky," she replied. "Do you think we could go over to the house on Elm Street to pick up a few things? All of Christina's belongings were sent there and Rafe and I need a few more necessities."

He nodded. "I'll call the house and arrange for Elijah to be alone for a while. Is half an hour long enough for you to freshen up?" he asked me.

"Sure." I didn't think I needed that long, but I did want to see my room.

"I'll call down for a vehicle, then," Brenda said. "Maybe a van? How much did you need to pick up?"

We stopped at the foot of the stairs and I looked up them thoughtfully. There was only one thing I really needed. "There's a trunk I'd like to pick up," I told her, not meeting her eyes. "It's not too big, it should fit in the back of a van."

"I'll see you tomorrow evening, then," Micky said to Frasier and I. "Hopefully we can settle things pretty quickly with your help." He turned to Brenda. "Be careful out there, you know what to watch for."

"I know," she responded with a smile.

Micky nodded to Rafael, then turned and walked back toward the sitting room.

A WARM WELCOME

AND IF LOVE REMAINS THOUGH EVERYTHING IS LOST
WE WILL PAY THE PRICE BUT WE WILL NOT COUNT THE COST
BRAVADO - RUSH

Brenda led us up the stairs, then toward the right when the staircase split. "You're rooms are right across the hall from our suite," she told us. Once we reached the hallway, I noticed that she reached for Rafael's hand. "Elvira thought you would like to be near family."

"We're Tremere," I commented with a wry smile. "Aren't we all family?"

She nodded. "I want to show you my suite before we go to your room so you know where you can find me." She opened a door on the left side of the hall and led us in.

I realized that Rafael was standing very close to Brenda and that she was allowing it. The room was neat and clean, but someone had left the closet door open. I noticed that there were men's clothes hung on one side of the walk in closet, and women's clothing hung on the other.

"There's an extra bedroom through that door," Brenda told us, gesturing to a door near a small table. "If you need to, you can store things in there."

Extra bedroom? "Hopefully we won't be here long enough to need it," I replied.

"I know," she said sadly. "I miss Jorell."

"Who?" I asked, surprised.

"Jorell."

I frowned. "Isn't that Superman's father?"

Brenda looked at Rafael in surprise. "Is that where the name came from?"

He blushed, actually blushed. "Yeah."

Brenda touched his hand and he held it in his. "Jorell is my puppy," she said quietly.

"You have a dog?" Not many Kindred were good with animals. "And he likes you? Have you been feeding him?"

"He loves me," she told me. "I haven't been feeding him anything but Puppy Chow." She turned to Rafael. "We should call Samantha and see if he needs any more food."

"I talked to her earlier," he said reassuringly. "She has plenty, and they're staying with Rachael for now."

"Why?" Brenda asked.

"Something about a mirror Bruce got this evening," he replied with a shrug. "I don't know the details, but Lydia is staying with them too. Jax said something about it in passing earlier."

"Oh," she said nonchalantly, "you were talking to Jax?" Something in her tone told me that she didn't like that too much.

"Yeah," Rafael told her, "in passing." He pulled her closer to his side and put an arm around her.

Brenda was trying to hide the fact that she was upset, but I didn't want to ask about what out loud. I had made mental contact with her just a few minutes before, could I do it again?

You already have it, she told me.

Okay, I replied slowly, *that was too easy. What's up with Jax?*

Hopefully nothing, she replied, but I could read worry behind her words.

I was afraid to ask. Do I want to know why there would be anything?

I don't know.

With a glance at Rafael, I thought, Does he, you know, swing both ways?

He used to, she admitted.

I smiled. You've converted the poor boy?

Well, she replied indignantly, I didn't think it was a fate worse than death or anything.

I couldn't stop myself from laughing.

Frasier looked at me. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah," I said with a grin.

He shook his head. "Ok, did somebody tell you a joke that no one else heard?"

I laughed again. "Actually, yeah."

Rafael shot Brenda a speculative look. "Are you...?"

She smiled back at him lovingly. "Just a little," she admitted.

He shook his head at her in mock anger. "I think that's impolite in company, you might make someone think you're talking about them."

"See, mama always told me if I can't say anything nice, don't say nothing at all," she told him. "Out loud."

He laughed, and bent to kiss her on the cheek.

Ooh, I shot to her mentally, you've got the live one.

Rafael put his arm around Brenda's waist, and she returned the embrace. Their closeness woke a longing inside of me, and I turned away from them. I didn't know if I could continue to watch Brenda with her man, when I didn't have one of my own. Of course, I could always have O'Connell if I wanted him. But did I?

Don't do anything fast, I heard Brenda say in my mind.

I shook my head. *Okay, I've got to remember to turn that switch off when I don't want you to hear me, I told her. I haven't done anything fast, although I almost did.* This was not a subject I wanted to pursue with Frasier standing next to me. *Do you want to show me my room now so we don't stand here looking dorky?*

Again.

We laughed, and Frasier looked meaningfully at Rafael. "They could at least teach us that so we can talk to each other," he said.

I look to Brenda, startled at the thought. *Can we do that?*

She returned my look with a speculative one of her own. *Antonio never said.*

What daddy doesn't know, I told her with a smile.

Won't get us spanked, she quipped.

We both broke out laughing helplessly.

"Dude," Frasier said to Rafael, "did Micky say across the hall?"

I controlled myself with an effort. "Brenda?"

She took Rafael's hand and led us across the hall, explaining that Frasier and I had connecting rooms.

You really want me in trouble, don't you? I asked her silently.

I want you protected, she told me, then said aloud, "There is another adjoining room to this one, but no one is in there right now."

The room was a bit larger than Brenda's was, with a large four poster bed. On the wall opposite the bed were large windows that opened onto a balcony. A table sat between the two windows that

had several chairs pulled up around it. The connecting door to Frasier's room was near the bed, while the other connecting door was near the door to the attached bath and closet.

"Is it Christmas already?" I asked when I saw two brightly wrapped packages on the bed.

Brenda smiled. "Well, a couple of them rolled into one."

I returned her smile. "It's been a few, hasn't it?"

"Yeah," she replied. "Actually the longer one is for Frasier."

"Santa knew you were coming," I told him.

"Santa just put his order in really quick," Brenda laughed.

I gestured toward the bed. "O'Connell, lets open our gifts."

"Ladies first," he said with a grin.

I walked over to the bed and sat down beside the smaller package. I picked it up and shook it, but whatever was inside didn't make any noise. I looked at my sister. "Brenda, you really didn't have to get me anything," I told her, just before I started to rip the paper off.

Brenda watched my excitement, then said, "It's a good thing I didn't want to keep the paper."

I stopped abruptly and looked at her. "You could always tape it."

She laughed. "Shellac it."

I grinned at her. "If you didn't want me to rip the paper, you shouldn't have wrapped it," I told her. I ripped the paper the rest of the way off to reveal a portable computer still in it's packaging. "Cool," I exclaimed. It was the latest technology had to offer in laptops.

"Is it okay?" Brenda asked. "It's the same as mine."

"It's great," I told her and I meant it. I turned to Frasier. "O'Connell, its your turn."

He lifted the long box and began to remove the paper carefully and meticulously.

I rolled my eyes. "You're just showing off now," I chuckled.

He looked at me in surprise. "No, I've always been a paper saver."

"Did you save it to wrap the next years presents with?" I asked, barely containing a grin.

"No," he said, shaking his head. "I saved it so I could be reminded of the joy in which the present was given."

I remembered that he had come into this world with nothing but the bag now lying at his feet. If he truly felt that way, how could he have walked through that portal with me without a thought for all the memories he left behind? I didn't understand him at all.

When he got the paper off, he held a long beautifully carved wooden box. He laid it on the bed and opened it to reveal a long-sword, beautifully carved.

I was amazed. "You didn't bring a sword," I noted, "do you know how to use that?"

He grinned. "I dabbled a little when I was younger, but it's been a while." He took a step toward the middle of the room and swung the sword around gracefully.

"Bruce said something about checking the counterweight," Brenda told him.

"Is that the same Bruce I met in Nashville?" I asked. He'd been there with Brenda trying to find Micky's girlfriend, Sarah Hamilton. Sarah had been the reason that Brenda had been in Nashville when Luke, Lena and I were there searching for Jason. Sarah had gone to the city to kill her brother, and Brenda had followed with Bruce to offer whatever assistance they could.

"Yeah."

"How has he adjusted?" I asked. Bruce had risen from torpor just prior to traveling to Nashville with Brenda. He'd been asleep nearly a thousand years.

"Wonderfully," she replied.

"Perhaps he could help us out with O'Connell," I said thoughtfully.

Brenda smiled. "Elvira did mention something about that."

I sighed in relief. "Good, I was kind of worried. I don't have the first clue other than the Internet and books."

"That's not bad," she told me. "At least he was aware of what he was doing, and so were you, unlike me who was not prepared."

"For this thousand year old guy to come out of the ground," I added.

"Bruce is a thousand years old?" Rafael asked in amazement.

"Yes," Brenda replied, smiling. "Hatched like a duck egg."

He shook his head in wonder. "You'll tell me later, I'm sure."

"Yes." She laid her head on his shoulder, then looked at me and straightened. "Rafe, why don't you show O'Connell the next room?"

"Sure," he said, walking over to the connecting door. He put his hand on the knob, then looked back at me. "This one locks too."

Frasier put the sword back in the box and lifted both it and his bag. He winked at me as he passed and I smiled at him.

"He's a character," Brenda commented when they had gone into the other room. "I like him."

I nodded. "I do too." He was good for me.

"I can't wait until we can go back to the house."

"Were you going to call for the car?" I reminded her.

She gave me a quick overview of the house telephone system, then dialed the garage for a van.

"Brenda," I said when she hung up. "What's up with the..." I didn't know how to say it, so I just gestured toward Frasier's room. "Pretty cozy. I didn't really-I knew you were sleeping with him, but I didn't think you were like this."

"Continuing?" she asked. "Getting on with my life?"

I smiled. "Healthy, I guess. I can't say that I blame you, I tried that myself." Of course, it hadn't worked too well for me, but perhaps Brenda would have more luck.

"It feels good."

"I hope it works." Privately, I had my doubts.

"How's Frasier?" she asked, changing the subject. "He seems like a nice enough fellow."

I laughed. "You have no idea what he does with weapons."

She grinned. "I thought you were going to say something else."

"He's, ah, a little too tempting," I told her.

She sat down beside me and took my hand. "Well, you'll know when it's right, believe me," she said firmly. "You'll know when it's right."

"I'm actually very surprised that he decided to come back with me," I murmured. "It was... unbelievable. This guy has no fear. Unbelievable," I repeated.

"Rafe has never shown fear either," she replied softly. "Maybe it's something in the blood because I know he should have been scared at some point. Rafe has been like a rock."

I looked away, thinking about the time when Luke had been my rock.

"You're thinking of him, aren't you?" Brenda asked.

I chuckled wryly. "Which him?"

She smiled sadly. "Does it matter?"

"I guess not," I whispered. My fingers found a seam on the box in my lap and ran along the edge. Brenda put her arm around my waist and I laid my head on her shoulder.

She started humming, and it took me a minute to realize what the tune was. I laughed. "I take it you stocked up on shampoo?"

"Lots of shampoo," she told me, her hand running along my scalp in a scrubbing motion. "Lots of it. Come on, let's go over to the house." She walked to the door of Frasier's room. "Rafe, are you guys ready?"

I followed her to get a look at Frasier's bedroom. It was a lot smaller than mine was, but it did have a computer and its own bathroom. We went into the hall from his room, and down to the car.

Brenda introduced the ghouls at the door to us. I had already met Jax, and the other one's name was Sam. I glanced at Frasier and hoped that he remembered the names. Tremere ghouls tend to stick together, especially those that live in the same house.

Remembering that he had jumped over the door of the Mustang rather than open the door, I showed Frasier how to open the van door, which was different than the door of my car.

He glanced around self-consciously, then said flippantly, "Thank you, milady."

I gave him an exaggerated bow and motioned for him to get inside. As he did so, he pretended to pull a long skirt in with him. I hid a smile. "That would look better if you still had your kilt on," I whispered to him.

"Yeah," he said just as softly, "but then you'd see my legs and you'd want them."

I couldn't help but laugh as I closed the door. I climbed in the back of the van with Brenda and we were off.

MEMORIES AND DISTRACTIONS

I'VE BEEN PRAYING AND I'VE BEEN WAITING
FOR SOME KIND OF PEACE
WHY DO I STILL WANT YOU - CHELY WRIGHT

Rafael drove quickly through the dark streets of Salem to Brenda's home. As we pulled up to the front of the house, I looked at it with trepidation. I really didn't have good memories of this house because the last time I'd been there, I was nearly starved into frenzy. Jason had saved me, Jason, Antonio, Michael and Brenda. Just looking up at the house made the hunger burn inside of me.

I remembered arguing with Antonio when I found out that he'd lied about knowing a way to find out who had embraced me. It was the last time I'd seen him. Suddenly I was nearly overwhelmed with longing to see my sire.

Brenda led us up the steps and opened the door. She greeted the tall dark man who stepped out of the sitting room when we entered the hall. "How are things going?" she asked him.

"Everything is fine so far, Ms. Thompson," he replied respectfully.

"We'll only be a few minutes," she assured him.

He smiled. "I sent the lot of them out for Chinese."

Brenda pointed out the sitting room and the study, then led us into the living room. She looked at an empty table by the doorway. "Where are my photographs?" she demanded.

"I placed them in the drawer," he told her. "I thought it would be best if the others weren't aware of them."

She opened the drawer and took out the picture frames. I watched Rafael watch her and wondered why he seemed upset at her actions.

"Is there a reason you're taking all the pictures?" I asked her in an effort to ignore the memories the house was bringing back.

She shrugged. "I just wanted to put them up in the suite. Family."

Rafael turned away and led us back into the hall and gestured toward the stairs.

"I've been in this house before," I said softly. "I did a sort of walk through on the upstairs but I'm a little more familiar with the cells in the basement."

Brenda laid a hand on my shoulder. "Well, rest assured that you don't have to go down there if you don't want to."

Rafael turned to look at me in surprise. "You were in the cells? In the basement?"

"Yeah, actually, I was the first one of the family to come to Salem, and not exactly by choice," I replied, then turned to Frasier. "See, O'Connell? I told you I needed a bodyguard."

He grinned. "I'm not touching that one, you just open yourself way too much, I'm not going there."

Brenda patted his arm. "You're a nice guy," she said with a smile. "We're gonna get along just fine."

I rolled my eyes. "Great, now they'll gang up on me."

We had continued up the stairs as we talked, and I noticed that Rafael was being very quiet. Brenda took his hand when we got to the doorway to my room. The boxes I'd left in the chantry were stacked against the wall around the fireplace and the wall opposite the door. My trunk was on the bottom of the stack near the fireplace.

"If you want you can wait until we come back for Frasier to choose his room upstairs," Brenda said.

I looked at her. "No one is using them?" When I'd been here before, those rooms had been servant's quarters.

"No," she assured me. "We're having one of the rooms converted to a study for Rafe, but other than that, nothing is used up there. Why don't you get what you need, I need to pick up a few things from our room."

I raised an eyebrow at that. *Our room?* I asked her silently.

She gave me an even look. *Don't go there.*

I smiled. *I'm not the one who went there, dear,* I reminded her. *You're obviously the one who went there.*

Brenda turned and led Rafael out of the room, leaving me alone with Frasier. I took a look around the room for a moment, then pointed the trunk out to Frasier along with a few other boxes that held things I wanted to take back to the chantry. He wouldn't let me move any of the boxes, brushing aside my objections and placing them on the bed.

I heard laughter from across the hall and stopped for a moment, listening. I shook my head and turned blindly to open one of the boxes, muttering a brief obscenity under my breath.

"Hey, hey, hey," Frasier chastened me.

I closed my eyes briefly. "What, do we have another Jason here?"

He asked questions about the compact disks that I gathered, taking my mind off the pair across the hall. I chose a dozen compact disks I thought he would like, and half as many movies. I made sure we grabbed my portable radio so that he would be able to listen to the music, and made a mental note to find a television and a VCR for him to watch the movies. From two boxes of books, I picked a wide selection of volumes for both of us to read, including several magical tomes and the bible my father had given me. I sorted enough clothing out to last me a week or so and added them to the pile on the bed.

Frasier put the trunk at the foot of the bed, and I opened the lid to gaze down at the contents for a moment, frozen. In the trunk were some of the things Luke had given me over our time together. I shook myself and began piling everything on top quickly. When I stood, I noticed an unfamiliar box among the others piled against a wall.

It wasn't very large, and when I shook it, there appeared to be at least one large and several small items inside. I sat down on the bed and peeked inside and only to see black nylon. I opened the box and pulled out a Nikon bag. I recognized the feel of a camera inside immediately. I pulled it out. It was a very expensive camera. In the bottom of the box was an assortment of lenses and film. My hands moved of their own volition to load the camera with a few quick practiced motions.

The camera felt good in my hands. I hadn't held a camera or taken a picture since I had left Jason at the monastery two years ago. I hadn't realized that I had missed it, or how much. I stood looking down at it for a long time, silent.

I lifted the camera and swung it in an easy motion toward Frasier. "O'Connell," I called softly. When he turned, I snapped a photograph. I knew it wouldn't be a good one, but I had wanted to surprise him. I had.

"Jesus, Christina," he mumbled, "what was that?"

"A camera," I told him. "I know you have cameras on your world, I saw the photographs. Wait a minute, if I can't say 'Jesus,' how come you can?"

He stood straight. "'Cause I didn't mean it."

I laughed. "And I did?"

"Yep," he told me, a smile lurking on the edges of his mouth, "women always mean what they say. Men, they just gibber."

I chose a lens from the box and put it in place without fumbling. Frasier walked over and watched me closely, and I knew that my movements with the camera were as practiced as his were when he handled a weapon.

"You look like you know what you're doing over there," he murmured.

My hands stilled. "Yeah, I do, don't I?" I glanced up at him, surprised. The cameras that I had owned before were nothing like this one. They had been simple 35mm cameras, no fancy lenses, just point and shoot. I shrugged and put the box with its camera accessories into the trunk. I closed the lid and fastened it shut, trying hard not to think about what lay in the bottom of the trunk.

He came over to watch me and I raised the camera for another photo.

"Thanks," he said wryly. "I hope I don't have to use my gun anytime soon. If I do, I'll be screwed."

"Don't worry," I told him, trying to hold in my laughter, "I'll protect you."

"Don't worry," he repeated, "your fingerprint's on the laser gun."

"I wasn't thinking of lasers," I said with a smile, "I was thinking more like claws." I held the camera in my left hand and raised my right, growing the inch long claws on each finger almost instantly.

"Whoa," he breathed. "Where do you get such wonderful toys?"

The smile on my face faded. "A friend showed me." I retracted the claws noticeably slower than I had extended them.

Frasier leaned in and gave me a quick kiss. I jumped back a moment too late.

"What was that for?" I demanded.

"To get you out of that," he told me reprovably.

I shook my head, but knew that it had worked. I had been thinking of Luke and Frasier had broken me out of it. It was one of the reasons I had agreed to bring him to my world. I put the box in the trunk but kept the camera and its bag. I wanted to ask Brenda if she knew where it had come from. I gestured to the trunk. "You want to help me—"

Before I could finish the sentence, Frasier had the trunk on his shoulder. "I'm going to go ahead and take this down."

"Okay."

I passed in front of him to go out the door and felt a hard slap on my rear end. I gasped and turned, surprised. "What the hell was that for?"

He grinned. "To make sure you stay on that even keel."

"Isn't that what I have you for?" I asked with a smile.

"Yeah," he agreed, "but I'll be downstairs."

"Okay," I laughed. "I'll just let the memory of that smack carry me through the next few minutes without you."

He nodded. "Yeah, there we go."

"Just don't go outside," I told him gravely. "Stay in the house." He didn't know much about this world or his new abilities, and I knew that would make him vulnerable if the Sabbath showed up.

"Yeah, okay," he said as he turned to walk toward the stairs.

"Stay inside," I called after him, not sure if he'd taken me seriously.

I walked to the door of Brenda's room and saw Brenda standing over a suitcase on the bed with Rafael behind her, nuzzling her neck. I tapped on the door lightly, and she brushed him away.

"Are you ready?" she asked.

"Yeah, Frasier has the trunk with everything I need downstairs." I lifted the camera in my hand. "Do have any idea where this came from?"

She blinked. "Oh, shit. You saw that, huh?"

"It was in a box," I told her. "Did you not mean for me to find it?"

She looked at Rafael. "I thought you were going to put that away."

He looked back at her blankly; apparently she hadn't told him to do anything with the camera.

I smiled. "I take it that this is mine, but that you didn't mean to give it to me this soon."

"Okay," she replied, "I actually have an ulterior motive. You know the family pictures I have really need to be updated."

"Yeah?" I asked. "You're saying we should go to Veg—" I caught myself before I could finish the word, but she'd heard it.

"No," she said firmly, "I'm not saying we should go to Vegas."

I shook my head and laughed awkwardly. "I meant to say LA," I told her. I gave her a steady look. "I'm not going to LA," I said adamantly. "If you want a picture of Antonio, he's going to have to come here."

She turned back to her packing. "Well, he's been asking about it."

I was confused. "Pictures?"

"No," she told me. "Coming here."

Is this a good thing? I asked her mentally. I hoped he didn't want to come and chastise me in person.

"Yeah," Brenda replied. "With all the Sabbath trouble and everything."

I gave a relieved sigh. "It's a Sabbath thing. Antonio wasn't very happy when I talked to him last," I told her. "He made some threatening insinuations."

"About what?" She seemed surprised.

I shot her a mental picture of Luke.

"He's only doing that to protect you," she reminded me.

I hoped fervently that I didn't need that kind of protection.

"All right," she said, putting the last item in the suitcase, "let's go."

Rafe picked up the suitcase before she could do so. "Let me get that for you," he told her, "although you could probably lift more than I could." he put his arm around her waist and I moved into the hall to let them walk ahead of me toward the stairs.

I looked at the stairs leading upward. "So, there's another floor to this thing?" Then I remembered that I had seen been up there. "Although I guess I saw it when we went to feed. That was a strange night."

Brenda looked back at me. "Did you want to go upstairs and check?"

I shook my head. "No," I told her firmly. I had seen enough of the house tonight. "I'm not sure I'm ready for the fifty cent tour," I added, "it may be a bit much for me."

She smiled at me encouragingly. "It'll be okay."

As we started down the stairs, I remembered Jason saving me from the cell in the basement, remembered drinking the blood from his neck. I could recall perfectly the feel of his chest as I had

reached inside his jacket for the Glock he'd kept there. I stood looking at the panel that hid the secret room, and longed to be held in his arms once more.

"Chris," Brenda called from the bottom of the steps, "are you coming?"

I shook my head to drive the memories away. "Yeah," I told her. "Yeah, I'm coming. I'm coming." I caught up with them and we approached the front door. Frasier stood next to the trunk talking to Elijah. When we got close to them, Frasier picked up the trunk.

I was unable to stop thinking about Jason until Frasier smacked me on the behind again. I looked at him sternly. "Will you stop that?" I demanded.

He was not intimidated. "You stop, I stop," he told me.

"Stop what?" Brenda asked.

I ignored her question. "Can we go?" I replied.

She shook her head. "See, whenever something's going on, she always wants to go."

"Can we go?" I repeated firmly.

She gestured at the door. "Go."

I opened the door and glanced around quickly before allowing Frasier to exit. Rafael opened the back of the van and Frasier set the trunk inside. Rafael put the suitcase in on top of it then closed the hatch. We all climbed into the van and Rafael showed Frasier how to operate the radio. He fiddled with it until Rafael turned off the van in front of the chantry steps.

CONFESSIONS

I'M CRYING ALL THE TIME SALTY STAINING TEARS
AND MOURNING FOR THE PAST
SMOKE AND ASHES - TRACY CHAPMAN

Brenda and Rafael went to their room, while Frasier followed me into mine and set the trunk down at the foot of my bed. I knelt down and opened the lid. I pulled out the radio first and handed it to Frasier.

"Take this in your room," I told him. "I didn't see a radio in there." There wasn't one in my room, either, but I didn't feel much like listening to music. "Take these CD's too," I said, handing them to him. I tried to show him how to use them but apparently he already knew.

He carried everything into his room, but left the connecting door open. I pulled out the movies that I had chosen for him and carried them to the doorway.

"Maybe we can arrange for a television and a VCR to be delivered tomorrow by the time you wake up," I said softly.

"Sure," he replied absently. He plugged in the radio and put in the first CD. He started dancing facetiously and I knew he was only doing it for my benefit.

I chuckled and set the movies down on the desk. "Do you want to go through the books I brought tonight?"

"I'll get to them," he replied. "I still have some other ones to read."

"Okay." I left him to his music and went back to unpacking. I put the books on the dresser, listening to the music coming from Frasier's room.

I opened the trunk and filled my arms with clothes. As I was carrying them toward the closet, I heard a knock on the door. I paused to open it and let Brenda in, then continued on toward the closet.

"Brenda," I commented as I hung the clothes up on the bar, "I expected you back a few minutes ago."

I came out of the closet and saw Brenda leaning against the door looking stunned. There was a dreamy look on her face. "What?" When she didn't answer me, I waived a hand in front of her eyes. "What?"

That brought her out of it. "What? I'm sorry," she whispered.

"What's with the 'oh my God' look on your face?" I asked.

She still seemed a little out of it. "Do Kindred get married?"

I wasn't sure I'd heard her right. "What?"

"Do we get married?"

I shook my head, frowning. "I don't know, Brenda. Long term relationships, maybe? I don't know." I considered it for a moment. "I don't see why we couldn't."

"Who would marry us?" she whispered absently.

I studied her face closely. "Why, did he ask you to marry him?"

She nodded slowly. "Yeah, kind of," she breathed. "I think."

"You think? Girl, either he did or he didn't," I told her.

"Well," she said thoughtfully, "he said that he liked the sound of Mrs. Brown."

"And how did all this come up?" I asked.

Brenda looked down. "I was pressuring him because I know that he's bothered by Michael," she admitted, "and I try to make it as unimportant as possible."

I remembered my time with Luke. "Yeah," I whispered, "I know what that's like."

"And when I picked up all the pictures," she continued, not having heard me, "I have a picture of Michael that I kept in that drawer."

I nodded. "I noticed you picked it up."

"Yeah, well, so did he," she said wryly, "and I think he thought that I was going to bring it here or something, which I wasn't going to do. I just didn't want to leave it downstairs in a house full of Lupines."

I knew I had spaced out when Brenda snapped her finger in front of my face. I found my fingers twisting the spot where a ring was no longer on my finger.

"Are you okay?" Brenda asked me. "Where were you?"

I shook my head. "Someplace I shouldn't have been," I told her. I'd been thinking of Jason and Luke. "Two places I shouldn't have been."

"Didn't you used to wear a ring that you were pretending not to be playing with just now?" she asked, looking at my hands.

I feigned innocence. "I'm not playing with a ring."

She smiled, "You were trying to," she told me. "You couldn't because there is no ring there."

"Yeah, well," I said with a shrug, "it got left at the Holding."

"Why?" she asked quietly.

I gave her a sad smile. "I don't need it anymore," I told her. I used to think I needed the ring to remind me of Jason, but I really didn't. When I'd realized that, I'd left it with the note.

"Who gave it to you?" Brenda inquired softly.

I closed my eyes. "Jason."

She smiled. "We're a couple of screwed up people, aren't we?" She walked over to me, then for the first time seemed to notice the music spilling into the room. "Is Frasier in there?"

"Yeah," I answered. "Let me go shut the door."

"Well, do you want him to go hang with Rafe?" she asked.

"Yeah, if that's okay," I replied. "I don't want to pawn O'Connell off on your... assistant."

"Let me go ask what he's got going on," she said. "I'll just pop over there, then pop back."

"Okay," I told her. "I'll just keep putting my stuff away."

I got the rest of my things out of the trunk before Brenda returned. I closed the lid just as she came back in. When she said that Rafael would welcome the company, I went to the door of Frasier's room.

"O'Connell?"

He looked up from the book he'd been reading. "Yeah?"

"Rafael wants to know if you'd like to go chitchat with him while Brenda and I are chitchatting," I said with a smile.

He shrugged. "Okay." He got up and turned off the radio, then walked through the door into my room. He nodded at Brenda, then bent to kiss my cheek. As he continued past me, I was startled to feel a swat on my backside. I laughed softly, and returned the smack.

When Frasier had gone into the hall, Brenda smiled at me. "This guy is too much," she said softly.

"Well, he's good for me," I admitted.

"Yes he is," she agreed. "I must admit I've already noticed a difference in you."

"Yeah." Frasier did have a tendency to keep my spirits up. Even as I said that, I could feel my spirits sinking.

"That doesn't mean that you can do that though," Brenda cautioned me.

I shook my head and changed the subject. "So he asked you to marry him?"

She walked closer to the bed, her fingers trailing on the bed stand. "I think so."

"What did you say?" I asked. Then I closed my eyes. "You didn't get all stupid, did you? Say something like 'no way'?"

"Yeah," she whispered. "I think I did."

I looked at her reproachfully. "Oh, Brenda."

"What was I supposed to do?" she demanded. "I've never heard of it before. Oh no."

"You handled it bad didn't you," I asked softly.

"Oh, I think I did." She cursed softly. "What was I supposed to do though?"

I put my hand on her shoulder. "I don't know, I've never heard of anyone like us getting married. Wouldn't it be too odd? You know I didn't want to ask, but aren't you and Michael still...?" I didn't know what the status of their relationship was. The last time I had talked to Michael, he had sounded as if he'd wanted to get back together with Brenda.

She walked away to look out the tall window. "No."

I sat down on the edge of the bed. "You wanna tell me about it?"

"There's not much to tell," she said, still looking out of the window. "He took one look at me after my embrace and wasn't interested anymore. Oh, he tried to sugar coat it and say that I had things to learn and a new life to adjust to, but what it really boils down to was the fact that he had lost control over what I did or didn't do. I think that's what the problem was."

"I don't know, Brenda, it seemed like he missed you when I saw him in LA." I remembered his sadness when I'd asked him about their relationship. "It seemed like he really wanted to get back with you. What happened? He's with the Sabbath now? Is he mister big-and-bad? What's up?" His behavior now didn't jive with what I knew about him.

"I don't know," she whispered. "I have suspicions about something... but I don't know. Have you ever heard of a body swap?"

I shook my head. "As in the Anne Rice novel?"

She told me about a man named George Allen whom the Sabbath had been holding hostage. One night he'd escaped and found Brenda. He had acted like he knew her and begged her forgiveness. He'd said that they had 'made' him do things, and that he had tried to get away. Before she could question him further, Elvira's childe Akari, a member of the Sabbath Pack, had shown up.

I was quite surprised that the prince's childe was a bad guy. From what I remembered of her and what Brenda had told me about her, Elvira Van Dorn was one of the fairest and most likeable princes I'd ever heard of. Perhaps things had been different when she was newly embraced.

Brenda confessed that she still loved and missed Michael, but that she felt he was a different person now. When she told me about the cameras and listening devices they'd found in her home, I was shocked. Then she recounted a tale I had no difficulty believing.

When they had first come to Salem two years ago, Michael had captured a young female member of the Inquisition. She had been following Antonio, and Michael had placed her in one of the subbasement cells of the old prince's home. Michael had proceeded to strip and torment the girl, then feed from her before leaving her alone in the cell.

I shuddered at the thought, remembering my own time in the late prince's cell. She had thought to force Antonio, Michael and Brenda into retrieving a powerful box for her, but instead she had found final death at Michael's fangs.

The girl, Sarah Hamilton, had been embraced by Micky within months of the incident. Sarah hadn't told Brenda what had happened until Michael had returned to town a few weeks ago. Brenda liked and respected both Micky and Sarah, so I knew I would like them as well.

Michael had also been involved in a home invasion the Sabbat pack had staged. According to one witness, he had cut the father's throat.

"I find that hard to believe, Brenda," I told her quietly.

"I do too, Chris," she replied with tears in her eyes, "but how do you explain it?"

Brenda and I spent the next four hours in my room talking. She told me about meeting Rafael, how he had known what she was at first glance. In a hushed voice she confided that he had been fired from an editorial position at a major publishing house in New York because he'd been sleeping with the boss's son.

She reminded me that Bruce Blackwell might be able to help Frasier acclimate himself to our world, as Bruce had been in torpor nearly a thousand years when Brenda had helped the Black Rose Coven wake him. I remembered Bruce as a quiet, self-assured Kindred that Brenda had been allowed to adopt as Tremere.

I told her everything about my relationship with Luke, how it had always felt as if Jason was there watching us. She thought perhaps with the Nosferatu abilities to hide in plain sight, he just might have been. I had to agree with her because I knew he'd been in my apartment at least once in the last two years. He had returned an earring to me that he'd taken from the jewelry box in my bedroom.

I told her how isolated and alone I had felt after Luke had discovered I still loved Jason and had stopped being there for me. She said that I should have called her then, but when I explained how ashamed I'd felt, she understood.

We talked about Jason and his behavior in Ramadan. Neither of us could offer an explanation for his ambivalence, so we decided that we just had to wait and see if he came to Salem.

When the subject of Frasier came up, we laughed over how I had met him. He'd been assisting a college professor when he'd seen me and been so completely distracted that the instructor had had to nudge him several times. We had met later and during our discussion Frasier had hit on me quite charmingly. When I had told him what I was and where I was from, he was all for coming with me, regardless of the consequences to himself.

When we had filled each other in on our lives, we went and found our men. They were in Frasier's room. Rafael had discovered and hooked up the video game I'd bought. Brenda and I stood in the doorway that connected my room to Frasier's and watched our men be boys for several minutes before we interrupted them.

Rafael stood quickly. "I apologize, Christina," he told me. "I found this with Frasier's things and thought he would like to try it out."

"It's not a problem," I replied with a smile. "I bought it for him, and I'm just glad that the two of you enjoyed it."

Frasier was engrossed in the game and didn't seem to notice our entrance. Brenda and Rafael said their goodnights and Frasier seemed to notice me at last. He called me over and I sat on the edge of his bed.

"How'd your talk go?" he asked.

I shrugged. "It's been a while since I sat up all night talking with one of my girlfriends," I admitted. The last time had been with Lena while we'd been searching for Jason.

He put his hand on my knee. "Did it help?"

I looked away from his probing eyes. Had it helped? I still missed Luke, but I felt like I was at least coping. It was Jason that I was having a hard time with. "I'll do okay," I told him.

"If you need me," he said softly, "I'll be right here."

I smiled and looked down at him. "I know you will," I replied, covering his hand with my own. "And I appreciate it."

"Anything for you," he whispered.

I leaned down and kissed his cheek, then stood and walked to the door to my room. "Good night, O'Connell," I said without turning.

"Goodnight, Chris," he answered.

I closed the door softly then went into the bathroom to change. When I came back out, I crossed to the trunk at the foot of the bed.

When I'd lived in Las Vegas, the trunk had held everything I owned that reminded me of Jason. Before I'd flown to Austria, I had packed its meager contents to take with me and replaced them with everything I had that reminded me of Luke.

Luke had given me many things during our time together, but most of them I had chosen to leave in Las Vegas. Consequently, there wasn't very much in the trunk, but what was there held poignant memories. I pulled out a small jewelry box and opened the lid to reveal several rings and pairs of earrings. I picked up the ring Luke had given me to mark the one year anniversary of the night we'd first made love. Firmly reining in my memories, I put the ring back into the box and closed the lid.

I covered everything Luke had given me with the pajamas I had taken from Jason's luggage before I had returned his things to him. I gathered a few things from my briefcase and knelt again by the trunk. I laid the glove I had pulled from Jason's hand in San Francisco on top of the pajamas, along with the earring he had returned to me in Ramadan. For a moment I fingered the communications device Jason had also given back to me, remembering how Luke had planted it on Jason so that I would have some connection with the man I loved after he'd walked away from me. I smiled grimly and laid it on the fabric next to the earring.

I debated returning the cross to its box, but decided against it. I knew I might need the blood it held if we were going to fight the Sabbath. I put the empty box in the trunk and closed it.

I sat down on the bed and laid the cross necklace next to the picture frame on the stand that held Jason's photo. It had been taken when he was still human on a rare occasion when he hadn't been using any of his many disguises. We had been up on the roof of my apartment building looking out over the lights of Las Vegas. I smiled at the memory despite the longing that I felt to be with him.

I picked up the frame and looked down into his beloved face, my tears falling on the glass. I shook my head at my foolishness; tears hadn't returned Jason to me two years ago, they wouldn't bring him back now. The only thing I could do was wait and see if he came to me. If he didn't, then I had to get on with my life.

I returned the frame to the stand and picked up the King James Bible I had left there. I opened it to Psalms: 23, the one Papa had told me was my mother's favorite. I read it slowly, savoring the verse, wondering if God heard the prayers of the damned. I laid back on the bed with the book and continued reading until sleep caught me in its numbing grip.

BLOOD TIES

WE STAND AND WE WON'T FALL
WE'RE ONE AND ONE FOR ALL
YOUTH GONE WILD - SKID ROW

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. Frasier gave me a toothy grin, and I felt the outline of a gun strapped to his thigh under the kilt he wore. He moved around to my front and pulled me close to him.

"Are you sure about this?" I asked, 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, showing 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.

I retracted my fangs and pulled his arm away. He shivered when I licked the wound closed, and I let out a low laugh. When I was sure he could stand, I released him, still watching his face.

"That was cool," he said in a husky voice. He lowered his head to kiss me and I 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 I opened my lips to meet 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 else. 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.

I shook my head to clear it 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 lifted my wrist and bit open the vein, then held it out to him. "Right here." I watched as he lifted my arm to his mouth and slowly touched the blood with his tongue. He seemed to ponder the taste for a moment, then settled his mouth onto the wound.

I felt myself glide into oblivion, his lips still draining the blood from my body.

The dream faded from my mind when I woke the next evening. Someone had come in sometime during the day to take the book from my chest and cover me with a light blanket. I glanced up to see Frasier standing by the dresser.

"Morning," he drawled.

I smiled. "Morning, O'Connell."

He walked over and sat down on the edge of the bed. "Did you have good dreams?"

I looked away. "I don't think so," I told him. "I don't remember."

He brushed the back of his fingers against my cheek. "What time are we supposed to meet Micky downstairs?"

I glanced at the clock. "Seven." It was only minutes after six.

"You wanna...?" he said, raising his eyebrows meaningfully.

I wasn't sure I wanted to get his meaning, I was still a little groggy from sleep. "What?"

"The third feeding," he prompted, "before we go out. We forgot last night."

"Are you so eager to be fully bound to me?" I asked him, frowning.

"I want to protect you, Christina," he told me, his voice smooth and deep. "I want whatever is necessary to do that."

I smiled and sat up against the headboard of the bed. The blankets fell to my waist, revealing the silky nightgown I wore.

Frasier glanced downward and grinned. The feel of his eyes on my skin reminded me how his hands had felt in the dream I'd had on the plane.

"Blood, Frasier," I reminded him and myself.

"Yeah," he replied, his eyes returning to mine.

I let my fangs drop and bit the vein in my wrist. He took my hand and drank. I savored the emotions I felt, the pulling sensation. His hands and lips were warm on my skin. Jason had been warm before his embrace and I had missed the heat, the warmth of a mortal. Perhaps I let him drink a little more than needed for the blood bond, but the pleasure I felt left me drifting on a sea of pleasure and hunger.

Finally I pulled my arm away from him. I watched the beat of his pulse on his neck as I licked the wound closed. When he would have risen, I grabbed his wrist.

"How do you feel, Frasier?" I asked him, my voice husky.

His eyes burned into mine. "Like I can do anything."

"Can you feed me?" The pulse in his neck kept drawing my attention.

Frasier grinned. "I can do anything you want me to, give you anything you want," he vowed.

I smiled and my fangs showed prominently against my lips. "I just want blood, Frasier," I replied, my voice warm with hunger. It was a bit soon after the last time I had fed from him, but he had just fed from me and I would be careful not to take too much.

He lifted his wrist to me, but I brushed it aside and pulled him closer to me. I laid my lips on the skin of his neck and whispered, "Here this time."

His arms went around me and pulled me close. I kissed the skin of his neck then gently bit into his flesh. His blood was warm and delicious, spiced faintly with my own vitae. Tasting myself within him excited me and I let my mouth gradually fill with his blood, drawing out the feeding. I savored every drop that I drank, filling myself with his essence. His arms tightened around me, pressing my body to his. The experience was heady to say the least. At last, I pulled away, my tongue dragging across the wound to close it. He shivered as I laid my head on his shoulder.

"You're warm," he whispered.

"I stole your heat," I replied gently, enjoying the feel of his arms around me.

"I don't get you, Christina," he told me.

"No?"

He pulled away and looked down at me. "Your Internet tells me that Kindred don't exist except in fantasy games," he said, his voice deadly serious. "I found site after site that told horrible stories of vampires and their evil throughout your history. But you aren't evil, are you." The last was more a statement than a question.

"I am Kindred," I stated simply. "I drink the blood of humans, but I don't hurt them unless I have to. I'm not the same as I was when I was mortal; I can never be that girl again, even if I could remember her. Like any other Kindred, I have a beast within me, one that must be controlled."

He smiled as if he didn't believe me. "Everyone has their beast."

"Yes, but Kindred have their beast closer to the surface," I told him. "Sometimes the beast takes over, sometimes the Kindred calls it forth. There is an old saying, Frasier, 'Beasts we are lest beasts we become.' Some Kindred, like those of the Sabbat, ride the beast, use it for their own needs. They become less than human."

"But you're not like that," he protested.

I shook my head. "I know I'll never be human, but that doesn't mean I have the right to destroy innocent lives," I replied. "That's why it's so important that we stop the Sabbat from taking over Salem."

He grinned. "Well, then, you wanna get ready?" he asked growing excited. "We've got evil vampires to kill."

"Actually," I said hesitantly, "I have something to ask of you."

"Anything," he replied seriously.

"You might not like it once I tell you," I warned him.

He grinned. "I'll like anything you want me to do."

"Even if I want you to watch over Jason?" I asked bluntly.

He blinked in surprise. "Aren't I supposed to watch over you?"

"Of course you are," I told him with a smile. "As long as I am alive, we'll take care of each other, we belong to each other. But if Jason comes to Salem and you happen to be with him and not me, I want you to take care of him."

"You mean like if you're busy somewhere else?"

"Yes," I answered firmly, "or if anything happened to me. If I died, I want you to promise that you'll help him. His life has always been more dangerous than mine."

Frasier grinned. "Maybe I shouldn't wait, maybe I should work for him instead of you," he teased.

I laughed wryly. "I don't think you would enjoy it as much, Frasier. Nosferatu blood tends to... change the person who drinks it. Remember I told you he looks nasty?"

"You also said he wasn't that bad," he reminded me.

"You know what I mean," I chided softly. I took his hand and added with all seriousness, "Besides that, I don't know what I would do without you to make me laugh. I would probably take a long walk on the beach at sunrise."

He looked confused. "But I thought you couldn't be in the sunlight?"

I returned his look with an even gaze and said nothing.

"You're serious, aren't you?" he asked intently. "Why would you do that?"

I looked away, unable to meet his eyes any longer. "Everyone needs something to look forward to," I told him. "Forever is a long time to spend alone." Tears filled my eyes as I remembered Jason saying those very words to me in Ramadan.

I wiped at the blood on my face. "It doesn't matter now, does it?" I asked him. "You're here, and you make me laugh." I forced myself to smile and looked up at him. "I won't be taking walks at dawn any time soon."

He gathered me into his arms and held me close. His heat crept into my body and I closed my eyes, enjoying the warm sensation. It would have been so easy for me to lift my face for his kiss, to gently undress him and allow him to make love to me. It would have been so easy, and so wrong.

I pulled away and looked into his eyes. "When you are with Jason and I am not there, you will protect him," I told Frasier clearly, dominating his will with my own to reinforce the words. "If I die, you will find him and guard his life with your own."

Frasier nodded. "I swear, Christina." He bent forward and gave me a chaste kiss. "For you, I will protect him."

"I'm sure Brenda would help you find him," I said with a sad smile. "She could check with Graves for you, I'm sure he'd know where Jason was."

"Chris," he whispered, already using Brenda's nickname for me.

I shook my head. "Give me twenty minutes to get ready," I told him. "Then we can go kill the evil vampires."

"Okay," he reluctantly replied. "I'll be in my room." He rose and strode to the door closing it softly behind him.

I rose from the bed and walked to the bathroom where I showered quickly. I dressed with swift practiced motions and brushed the tangles from my hair. I strapped on my weapons and went looking for Frasier. I crossed to the door that led to his room and heard voices. I knocked, then opened the door when I heard Frasier call out for me to enter. Rafael was with him.

"Rafe wanted to know if I was hungry," Frasier told me.

That was something I hadn't thought about. "Are you?"

Before he could answer me, we heard the screeching of tires from the driveway. Our rooms overlooked the courtyard and both had doors that opened onto private balcony. In a moment, the three of us were through the door, looking down at the drive.

A yellow GTO had skidded to a stop just short of the entry stairs of the house. The wind picked up suddenly and the light rain that had been falling turned into a downpour, soaking our clothes. Gunfire echoed through the courtyard as the ghouls at the door opened fire. Shadows sprung up from nowhere and cloaked the front door with darkness.

"Damn," Frasier whispered in awe.

Rafael and I drew our guns and fired at the car at almost the same instant. A tall black man stepped from the passenger's side of the car and raised his hands. Instantly, the lights in the house went out.

"Frasier, get your gun," I ordered sharply.

I stepped aside and stumbled as he dashed by me to go into the room. Rafael caught my arm to steady me, and at that moment a bright flash of light consumed the world.

ALTERNATE REALITY

THE LIGHT IN THE WINDOW IS A CRACK IN THE SKY
A STAIRWAY TO DARKNESS IN THE BLINK OF AN EYE
NO MORE TEARS - OZZY OSBOURNE

I was lying on a bed with Antonio sitting beside me. 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.

Suddenly I saw myself holding Jason in a dingy apartment. An overwhelming hatred swept through me, along with an even more powerful emptiness. I knew I had to kill him. As I drove my extended canines into his neck, he cried out in pain. "Please don't kill me," he whispered in my ear. I felt his blood fill my mouth and I drank deeply. I dropped his lifeless body to the ground and stood looking down at him, thinking, 'I have avenged my husband. I can now die in peace.'

Then I was kneeling at Brenda's feet looking up at the sword she held raised for a killing blow. "Thank you," I whispered with a smile. She hesitated only a moment before the blade fell, killing me instantly.

As my head cleared, I realized that Rafael still had a hold of my arm and was steadying me. I opened my eyes to find that we were standing in a strange living room.

"What's going on?" I demanded.

"I was hoping you could tell me," he replied wryly.

"Where are we?"

He shook his head and looked around. "Your guess is as good as mine. All I know is Brenda's going to freak out when she finds we're gone."

I stepped away and studied the room. It had the feel of a bachelor's living room, with stacks of newspapers, magazines and books everywhere. I didn't feel danger here, so I put my gun away. Rafael followed my example, looking around.

"Wait a minute," he murmured, "some of this stuff is mine!"

"Is this your old place?" I asked. "From before you met Brenda?"

"No," he told me, "and some of these things just aren't right, either." He approached a desk that lay on one wall and examined the papers lying on top. "This is even my handwriting, but I didn't write any of this."

I had spotted a newspaper on the floor and bent to pick it up. The headline jumped out at me and I cursed softly.

"What?" Rafael asked, coming to my side.

"'Executioner Seeking Warrant'," I read to him. I turned the paper so that he could see the photograph of Brenda smiling up at us. "'Brenda Moorecock goes before Judge Woodwise this afternoon to seek a warrant for the death of Christina Graves, claiming Graves killed Jason Kline, an Italian national who had been living in Nashville for the past four years. Moorecock is the state's vampire executioner, and a local vampire source told reporters that Moorecock wouldn't be seeking a warrant if Kline hadn't been the one to train her in hunting vampires. Graves could not be reached for comment, but a spokesperson for the vampire said that she acted according to ancient laws. Graves' husband of three years was killed several months ago, and it had been rumored that Kline killed him.'"

I looked at the date of the paper; it was the Nashville press, and only a few days old. "What is going on?" I asked Rafael.

"I don't know," he whispered, "I feel like we've stepped into an alternate universe."

I closed my eyes at the thought. "Maybe we have. Who's to say that Ramadan is the only alternate world out there? Maybe this one is just a lot closer to ours." I sighed and sat heavily on the couch. "Except in this one, Jason is dead." I put my head in my hands, suddenly weary.

"Do you think it's a coincidence that this vampire's name is Christina?" Rafael inquired, looking through the rest of the newspapers on the floor.

I shook my head, unwilling to think I would have killed Jason or married Graves under any circumstances, in any reality.

I heard Rafael's movements stop, and looked up to see him staring at me with shock on his face. He handed me an open issue of Time Magazine. A large picture of me dressed in black and attending a funeral dominated the page. "Talon Graves Dead," read the headline. The caption under my photograph read, "Christina Graves tearfully accepted condolences from the President at last week's funeral of her husband, Talon Graves. 'His murderer deserves a painful death,' she claimed."

I stood and began pacing the room, my steps quick and jerky. I could feel shock clouding my mind and I fought it desperately. Luke wasn't here to help me this time, and Brenda would never forgive me if something happened to her Rafe. I was the only one who could get us out of this, Rafe was only mortal. I stopped and threw a punch at the wall, burying my fist deep in the plaster. Rafe backed away from me quickly and his movements brought me to my senses. I turned and leaned against the wall looking up at the ceiling.

"I didn't mean to startle you," I whispered apologetically.

"No problem," he replied. "I'm just not used to a woman with a temper."

"Maybe you should check the house out," I said softly, closing my eyes, "see if you can find anything useful."

"What are you going to do?" he asked.

"Try and contact another Tremere." One of the Thaumaturgy rituals allowed contact with other Tremere in the area. It was normally used to announce ones arrival, but it was also helpful in emergency situations. When I had been lost in Italy two years ago, I hadn't known the ritual. Needless to say, it was one of the first things I'd learned when I returned to Vegas.

I slid to the ground, cleared my mind and began chanting softly to myself. An hour later, I gave up. Either there were no Tremere nearby, or the ritual didn't work in this reality.

I sighed and heard a noise to my left. I looked in the direction and saw that Rafael had been watching me. "Did you find anything?" I asked him.

"I thought you were sleeping," he commented as he crossed the room to sit on the couch. "That's the only time Brenda ever looks like that."

"Like what?"

"Like she's dead." He seemed uncomfortable.

I chuckled. "I am dead," I reminded him, "and so is she. From what I remember, she pretends life much better than I do."

He nodded. "You do seem more... still than she does."

I smiled. "Did you find out anything?"

He looked away. "This world is very similar to ours," he told me, "but there are some major differences. There is no Masquerade here, everyone knows that Kindred exist, except they're not

called that. As far as I can tell, there are no clan distinctions, although I believe the clans exist, they are just not referred to as such. A vampire is usually said to be of so-and-so's line."

"That would explain why the ritual wouldn't work," I murmured. "I reached out for Tremere in the area, and there aren't any."

"There appears to be no specific prince of the city either," he continued. "However, there is something called a 'Master' vampire, the strongest one of which in Nashville appears to be Wyatt Hamilton."

The name was familiar. "Does he look something like Lord Blackwell?" I asked.

"From the pictures I found, yes."

I groaned. "In our world, he's insane. Was insane, a hunter killed him."

"There is another master vampire, but nothing mentions his name," Rafael said. "They call him 'The Spaniard,' but there are no pictures of him. He was Christina Graves' sire. He sounds like the Kindred Brenda told me was her sire."

"Antonio Moreno. He's my sire too," I reminded him, rubbing a hand over my eyes. Then I remembered the visions I had had before finding myself in this world. Apparently, in this world he really was my sire. I described the visions I'd had to Rafe, then asked if he'd seen anything.

"Yes," he replied in a quiet agonized voice. "I saw my sister die when we were children, and I watched Brenda marry Michael. I saw you, too," he added. "You were giving me a packet of letters and begging me to give them to the Spaniard. You seemed terrified that he would kill Brenda if the Spaniard didn't get the letters."

"Show me what you've found," I asked.

Rafael handed me the articles he had found and opened what looked like a journal. I poured over the periodicals, searching for names I recognized, or similarities to our world.

At one point I heard a child's cry and looked questioningly at Rafael.

"This is a duplex," he told me. "There must be a family living next door."

We discussed how we had gotten into this world and why we ended up in Nashville. We agreed that it was possible that Rafe had gone through an exchange with the Rafael Brown of this world, in which case Brenda was really in for a surprise. But if my vision was right, there was no one to switch with me, because in this world I was dead. I believed that I had shifted to where the alternate Rafael had been simply because we had been touching at the time of the switch.

I wracked my mind for some kind of spell that would send us home, but I just didn't know of one. I thought that contacting Antonio would be our best chance at getting home, but I had no idea how to get a hold of him, or if he would even believe my story, especially if I was dead in this world.

WHAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN

I'M SPINNING, OH I'M SPINNING
HOW QUICK THE SUN CAN DROP AWAY
BLACK - PEARL JAM

Not much later I heard voices coming from the front porch.

"She is not here," a loud male voice said. "Even if she were, you must know you would not be welcome in our house." The voice seemed familiar, but I couldn't place it.

"I demand to see her!" another man replied. This one I had no trouble recognizing; it was Antonio. "She has much to answer for, Moorecock. Much to answer for."

"Moorecock?" I whispered to Rafe. In an instant, we were both on our feet and headed for the front window, which had a view of the porch that ran the width of the duplex.

"She had a warrant for your childe, Spaniard," the voice I now recognized as Michael's growled. "The kill was legal; you have no right to come here—"

I parted the curtains slightly and saw my sire standing on a narrow porch. It was definitely Antonio, but he looked much different. He was harder, colder than I remembered, and he was pissed. In amazement, I realized that I could feel the anger rolling off him in waves.

"I have every right," he told who I assumed to be Michael Moorecock. I knew he must have been standing inside of the house because I couldn't see him. "That bastard killed her husband. She was within our laws to take his life in return! The warrant against her would never have been issued if your wife hadn't pushed the issue! I demand satisfaction!"

Suddenly I felt another type of power wash over me. It was very animalistic in nature, and I couldn't figure out where it was coming from. I glanced at Rafael, and he seemed to feel it too.

"Demand your satisfaction from the courts, Spaniard," Michael replied, his voice somehow deeper and rougher, "you'll get nothing here."

"That's the Spaniard," Rafe whispered.

I saw movement from the corner of my eye and turned to see Brenda and Bruce coming up the walk. From their auras I could see that they were both confused, and both vampires.

"She's Kindred," I whispered to Rafe.

"Did she come here with us?" he asked softly.

Brenda stood at the bottom of the steps and looked at the vampire arguing with Michael. "I see you, Antonio Miquel Santiago Moreno," she said loudly.

The Spaniard stiffened and turned around slowly. He looked down at her for a long moment. "How do you know that name?" he asked, his normally light Spanish accent thickening in anger. "I have only told one person that name in three hundred years. Did you torture her before you killed her?"

I turned to Rafe. "She has to be our Brenda."

He started for the door, but I grabbed his arm.

"What are you going to do?" I demanded harshly. "You have to have a plan or you'll get yourself killed, and her."

He looked at me, his eyes agonized. I wondered if Frasier was going through the same agony at our separation.

"The Spaniard has to realize that she's not his Brenda," I told him. "Let me go out there first, maybe if he sees me, he'll be more easily convinced that there is something weird going on here."

Rafe nodded reluctantly. "I just want to touch her," he whispered.

I fought the tears that sprung to my eyes, very much aware of what his blood bond was putting him through. I wanted to be with Luke, too. I knew that just touching him would make me feel better, but I also knew that I would do anything to make sure that didn't happen.

"Soon, Rafael," I soothed. "You'll be with her soon."

I went to the front door and opened it slowly. As I reached for the latch on the screen door, Bruce saw me and pointed in my direction.

"Antonio," he prompted softly.

The Spaniard turned to look where Bruce had indicated and saw me opening the door. Joy swept over his face, joy that I'd never seen before in my sire. I stepped onto the porch and suddenly I was in his arms.

He spoke to me in Spanish, but as I didn't speak the language, I couldn't understand anything that he said. I hesitantly put my hands on his shoulders, unable to imagine what he must be going through.

"Antonio," I heard Brenda say from behind him, "unfortunately this is not your Christina."

I pulled back a little and smiled up at him tentatively. "Not today, I'm not," I told him, trying to be kind. "I know I haven't seen you in a while, Antonio, but...."

He looked down at me, confusion clear in his eyes. "Christina, what is going on?"

Rafe brushed past us to go to Brenda. A moment later she was in his arms. I looked back at the Spaniard. What could I say to the man who was my sire in this world, but was not truly my sire? I took a deep breath and tried to explain.

"I know that you think I'm your childe, but I'm not," I said softly, my hands still on his shoulders. "I know that you look like my Antonio, but you're the Spaniard. We just have to figure everything out and try to fix things."

I looked over his shoulder at Brenda. "This is not the Brenda Moorecock that you know," I told him firmly. "This is Brenda Thompson. In my world, she is your childe."

He shook his head sadly. "In this world she killed you," he said, his voice full of sorrow and pain.

"I know." I nodded, trying to think of a way to explain. "But in my world she is my sister, and you love us both very much. In my world, you did not embrace me, Antonio, but you did take me in and taught me how to live, how to hunt."

He reached up and touched my cheek gently. "But you look so much like my Christina," he whispered.

"I understand," I replied softly. "But I'm not her, and I need to get back to my own world."

Brenda cleared her throat and drew the Spaniard's attention. He looked at her warily, still unwilling to trust her.

"Your Christina apparently left this for you," she told him kindly, holding an envelope out to him. It was addressed to 'The Spaniard' in my handwriting.

The Spaniard snatched it out of her hand. "Where did you get this?" he demanded.

"Rafe had it," she replied, unruffled by his anger.

He repeated the question to Rafe, who shrugged.

"It was on a table by the door," Rafe told him. "I found it on the way out here and somehow I know that if you don't get that letter, you will kill Brenda. I don't want you to kill Brenda, so you might want to read it."

Antonio looked down at the envelope and slowly opened it. He moved under the porch light and began to read. After reading for only a moment, he seemed stunned and stumbled back against the porch rail where he sat down in an unsteady movement.

I leaned back against the wall of the house and rested my head against the siding. Now that Brenda and Bruce were with me, I was more than happy to let them figure out how to get us home. I hoped that Frasier was doing okay without me, that he wasn't freaking out when he'd found me gone. I also hoped that he would be able to find Jason without too many problems, that Elvira or someone in the chantry would help him.

Longing for home filled me with an ache I had no way to ease. I wanted to see the lights of Vegas again, I wanted to stand in my apartment and look at Luke and know I was home. Those were dangerous thoughts, and I knew I had to think of something, anything else.

I wondered where Jason was at that moment. Was he still at the Holding with Lena and her new baby? Or was he already on his way back to California and Graves? Did he know I was missing? If he did, would he even care?

"Are you all right?" Bruce asked me softly.

I jumped a little at the sound of his voice, then shook my head. "Yeah, sure," I said sarcastically. "We're God only knows where, and in this reality, I killed Jason and married Graves. Yeah, everything is hunky dory."

"Well, Jason is waiting for you," Bruce told me with a small smile.

I didn't think I'd heard him right. I blinked and shook my head. "What?"

"He arrived just after you disappeared," he said.

I shook my head again, shocked and unwilling to believe that life would be so cruel as to bring Jason to Salem and make it impossible for me to be with him.

Bruce nodded. "About six feet tall, blond hair kind of long, hazel eyes. He was there."

"Maybe you're from a different dimension than I'm from," I whispered, suddenly very frightened and unwilling to believe him.

"Does your world have a very powerful queen with an attitude?" he said gravely.

Everything about this man and Brenda had told me they were the Kindred I knew. How could what Bruce was telling me be true? Was he playing a mean joke on me? "You're serious, aren't you?" I asked him.

Bruce smiled. "When I came here, he was in Salem trying to find you."

If I hadn't been leaning against the wall, I would have fallen. Jason had come to Salem for me! He had come for me and I was here, in another world. Would he think I had lied about waiting for him? Would he think that I had gone back to Vegas and Luke?

I spun in a single violent motion and buried my hand in the side of the house. I didn't feel the pain until I pulled my hand out and rested my forehead on the wood.

"Are you all right?" the Spaniard asked, concerned.

I turned slowly and looked at him. "Oh, yeah," I said softly, cradling my wounded hand. "Hunky dory." I walked to the edge of the porch and stood staring out into the night.

Did I dare to believe that Jason was in Salem? Perhaps Bruce was mistaken. Perhaps he had meant that Frasier was waiting for me. Somehow, it seemed safer for me to believe that. What if we got back to our world and Jason wasn't waiting for me? That long walk in the sunrise was beginning to sound better and better.

"Christina," the Spaniard called softly.

I looked over my shoulder at him.

"Have you read these?" he asked me.

I looked at the pages in his hands covered with my handwriting. I shook my head. "No," I replied sadly. I wasn't sure I was ready to learn what I had been like in this world.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Bruce asked the Spaniard.

At that moment, Brenda walked out of the other half of the duplex, surprising me, as I hadn't realized that she'd gone inside.

The Spaniard looked at Brenda with sorrow written in every line of his body and face. "There is not even anything I can do," he said softly.

That made me want to read the pages in his hand, I wondered what the other me had written that could have convinced him to give up his vengeance.

Rafe took a step toward Brenda, but stopped when she made a small movement with her hand.

Michael glanced at them both. "Let me guess," he drawled in an angry voice, "Rafe went too."

Brenda looked down. "Yeah."

"And in the other world," Michael continued, "you two are lovers."

Brenda shot him a glance full of pain and weariness. I don't think she meant to reveal so much in front of Rafe, but there it was in her face. "Only because you left me," she said in a low voice.

Michael looked back at her, suddenly sad. "That wasn't me, Brenda," he replied, matching her low tone. "I would never leave my wife."

"Rachael is here?" I heard Bruce ask the Spaniard. "Where?"

Just then a car pulled up at the curb and a woman got out quickly. By the time she reached the sidewalk, she was joined by what appeared to be a teenaged girl, this one I recognized; it was Buffy Summers, the girl who had killed Wyatt Hamilton in Nashville nearly two years ago.

They both bounded up the walk, but the woman I didn't know skidded to a stop at the bottom of the stairs. Buffy got half way up them, then stopped and looked at all of us.

"Bruce?" the woman said softly, as if unwilling to believe he were there.

"Rachael," Bruce replied. He held his hand out to her and she walked up the remaining steps unsteadily. Bruce caught her in his arms when she collapsed against him, fighting tears of joy.

"Brenda?" Buffy said quietly, "what's going on here?"

I turned away from the happiness on Rachael's face. I let the others' conversation blend to a murmur and closed my eyes, trying to clear my mind completely. I didn't have very much success.

Bruce knew Rachael well in our world, but in this one, he had made her a vampire. He had risen from the ground in Salem, all right, but Elvira had killed him shortly afterward. Bruce had also been a good friend of the Spaniard.

Angel, Buffy's vampire friend, was not so nice in this reality. He had embraced Buffy before traveling to Salem. It seemed that many of the people who were in our world were also in this one, unlike the last alternate reality I had been to, Ramadan.

The Spaniard suggested that Rachael call Faith, the girl who had been the Tremere Primogen of Nashville in our world but in this one lived in Salem. He had apparently run her out of town a century ago, and Rachael knew her from living in Salem.

I gazed up at the star filled sky and wondered if they were the same stars that shone down on my world. I felt a light touch on my shoulder and spun quickly. It was the Spaniard.

"You look so much like her, I cannot believe that you are not her," he said softly.

I shook my head. "You don't quite look the same as the Antonio in my world," I told him.

"I was not the one who turned you, Tina?" he asked.

I smiled sadly. "I don't know who embraced me," I replied softly. "I was alone and didn't remember who I was. You found me and helped me become Tremere."

"What is this 'Tremere'?" Something about the way he'd said the word made me think he'd heard it before. I didn't understand why he would pretend to be confused by it.

"We have different clans of vampires in my world, Spaniard," I said. "Tremere are a close knit group, and we are magic users."

"What is your life like there?" He cupped his hand on my cheek. "I can't believe that it could be that much different than your life here."

Something in his touch was a little too familiar to me and I caught his hand. "In my world, Antonio Moreno is a father to me," I explained softly. "He is more of a father than my real father ever could have been."

He frowned. "Tell me more."

"We lived in Vegas and you watched over me as a father would," I continued. "One night Jason Kline—"

The Spaniard's eyes seemed to glow from within, but not like the Protean eyes I was used to. Once again, I felt his power roll over my skin. "The bastard," he spat.

I took a deep breath to stop the sudden shaking of my hands. "In my world, Jason is kind and gentle," I told him. "He has saved my life on many occasions. I would give my life for his. I love him."

He dropped his hand and studied my face. "In this world you also loved another, Christina, but there was always room in your heart for me."

I tried to smile, but it felt more like a grimace. "I tried to love someone else," I whispered, thinking of my years with Luke. "Jason is my heart."

Anger and pain warred on the Spaniard's face. For a moment, I was nearly overwhelmed by the energy sweeping over me. "You love a man who killed you in this world, a man who killed your husband."

My chin came up and I knew my eyes glowed briefly. "In my world he isn't a man any more than you are, Antonio Miquel Santiago Moreno. In my world, he is Kindred, a vampire. In my world, I hate Talon Graves and would gladly kill him for keeping Jason from me."

The Spaniard took a step back from me, wonder in his eyes. His force, whatever it had been, stopped abruptly. "You are not my Christina," he breathed softly.

I shook my head sadly. "No, Spaniard, I am not."

He smiled grimly. "It is ironic, is it not?" he asked. "In your world, you would die so that he may live. In this world, you killed him and died for it."

Something Buffy said caught my attention. "Christina's husband worked there."

"She's not married," Bruce told her.

I turned to see Bruce and Buffy standing together. Rachael had stepped a few feet away and was talking on the telephone. Rafe was pacing in front of Michael's door, but Brenda and Michael were nowhere to be seen.

"No," Buffy agreed, "she's dead."

Bruce smiled a bit. "She's a vamp, of course she's dead."

The ex-slayer shook her head. "No, Brenda killed her."

The Spaniard stiffened at her words and glared at her. She apparently didn't notice.

"Why would Brenda kill her sister?" Bruce asked.

"Christina married Talon Graves," Buffy explained. "Brenda was close to Jason Kline. Jason killed Graves, Christina killed Jason, and Brenda killed Christina." She looked at the man beside me. "The Spaniard came here to kill Brenda."

"In our world," Bruce told her, "Antonio sired the two girls, Brenda and Christina. In our world, Christina is seeing Jason."

"What?" Buffy demanded.

"In fact," Bruce added, "I've seen Jason, we were at the park together before we ended up in your world. Christina disappeared and he showed up with some others, and this mirror was delivered—"

I took a step closer to them. "Wait," I interrupted. "I was on the balcony with Rafe, O'Connell went inside and we ended up in the living room here. What happened after that?"

"Frasier came downstairs to get us so we went upstairs," he replied.

"Who's we?" I demanded impatiently.

"Me, Cormac, Nina, Jason, Stephen and Micky," he told me. "Brenda was in your room and let Micky come in, but they tried to shut Jason out. He opened the door, they closed it. He opened it again, they closed it again." Bruce smiled at the memory. "He was about to walk through the door but Cormac stopped him. Someone said that you died and everyone got out of his way. You remember in the Bible about Moses and the Red Sea?"

I could picture it just as he described. "So you didn't misspeak earlier," I asked slowly, "Jason is in Salem?"

"Yeah," Bruce replied, "and looking for you."

I swayed on my feet. As much as I had wanted, hoped and prayed for Jason to come for me, I never really thought he would. I turned and leaned against the house, trying to grasp what Bruce had told me. Jason had actually come for me! Had he been sent into this other world too? Was he here somewhere? Or did he believe that I had left Salem? Gone back to Vegas?

As if of its own volition, my hand shot into the side of the house again, leaving another gaping hole.

"Chris?" I turned to see that Brenda had come back outside in time to see me hit the wall.

"What?" I asked, pretending nonchalance.

"What are you doing?" she asked, concerned.

I shrugged. "I had an itch," I told her.

"With a big 'J'," Bruce said with a smile.

Brenda turned to Michael. "Is there any way you can uninvite me?"

He looked to the Spaniard. "Uninvite? Is it possible?"

The Spaniard gave him that inhuman smile. "Once we're in," he replied coolly, "we're in."

Somehow, I thought he was lying, but I didn't have any way to prove it, so I said nothing.

Rachael hung up the phone and turned back to the group, looking at the Spaniard. "You really pissed her off. I'm glad you didn't call." She told us that the only person in Salem who would know of the ritual was Angel, Buffy's sire. The Spaniard offered us the use of his private jet so that we could travel to Salem quickly.

Brenda was looking at the window into Rafael's living room, then turned to the Spaniard in puzzlement. "Excuse me, Mr. Spaniard, sir?" she asked hesitantly.

He gave her a level look. "Moorecock?"

"Thompson," she corrected him.

He smiled grimly. "Thompson."

"Could you tell me why I would have a reflection and Christina has a reflection and the rest of you do not?"

I turned to look at the window and sure enough, only Brenda, Rafael, Michael and myself were reflecting back.

The Spaniard was amazed. "How do you do that?" he demanded, his accent suddenly much stronger.

Bruce smiled. "I've been asking that since I got out of the ground."

"You don't have one," the Spaniard commented in surprise. "I thought you were from their world?"

Bruce shrugged. "It's a trait of my clan."

I frowned, looking at him. "I thought you were Tremere?" I asked softly.

Brenda sighed. "Just keep letting that cat out of the bag, there Bruce," she whispered.

I glanced at her, then back to Bruce. "You're not Tremere?"

"Christina," Brenda said quietly.

"Yeah?"

"Shadow," she told me.

My eyes widened and I looked from Bruce to Brenda. Only one clan used shadows: the Lasombra. I'd been told that all Lasombra were Sabbat.

"But you don't know," she added.

I shook my head and laughed, the first time I had done so since we had been sent to this other world.

"It takes one to fight one," Bruce said firmly. "And since one of our friends is now aligned with them..." he added, looking pointedly at Michael.

Brenda shook her head and reached out for Rafe's hand. "Bruce, don't go there."

"Any idea if there is anything needed for the ritual?" Rafe asked. "Just before we ended up here, I saw that Akari had the ring on."

Brenda shot him an intense look. "Elvira's ring?"

He nodded. "I think so."

Brenda turned to Rachael. "Does Elvira Van Dorn have a child by the name of Akari?"

"Yeah," she replied.

"He's alive?" Brenda asked. "What is he like?"

"He's a dick," she said strongly. "He and Beth have Elvira wrapped around their little finger."

"I'm gonna have to go to work," Brenda growled. Rafe looked at her in surprise, but I just laughed. "We do have phosphorous rounds," she added.

"Phosphorous?" Buffy asked.

"Dragon's breath," Brenda replied.

The ex-hunter shook her head. "There's no dragons in America," she told us. "They're only found in South East Asia."

"No," Brenda said. "Dragon's breath is a type of round. It explodes and catches fire."

Buffy was amazed. "Where do you get these?"

Bruce had drawn his gun and was glancing around, as if searching for a target to shoot at. Brenda called his name softly and he glanced at her.

Michael gave Bruce a cold look. "My children are sleeping," he said sternly.

"What?" Bruce demanded.

Brenda put a hand on his arm. "Put it away."

"Children." Michael repeated. "You know, babies? Sleeping, upstairs."

Bruce tried to speak, but no words came out.

"Bruce," Brenda pleaded softly, "can we go please?"

"By all means," the Spaniard told her. He turned to Michael still holding the notes in his hand. "Tell your wife she is safe from me for now, and that she has my child to thank for it."

Michael frowned, clearly not sure what to make of the Spaniard's words. "I will tell her," he replied. "But you know if you come back she'll kill you."

The Spaniard shook his head sadly. "I won't be back again unless she gives me cause to."

We turned to go down the walk, but Brenda stopped and turned to her ghoul. "Rafe, go ahead, I'll be down in a minute. Make sure that Chris is okay and gets to the car." Like I needed help.

Rafe offered me his arm and I took it, allowing him to lead me down the walk. I noticed that Rachael was holding Bruce's hand as we followed Buffy and the Spaniard. We stopped at the gate and I turned to see Brenda speaking to Michael quietly. He pulled out his wallet, took something out and gave it to her. She thanked him and turned to walk away. She stopped half way down the walk and looked back at him. I felt Rafe stiffen beside me and patted his shoulder in sympathy before I stepped away. When Brenda joined us, she put an arm around his waist and he pulled her close to his side.

The Spaniard looked speculatively at the four of us for a moment. "Your world is a lot different from ours," he said softly. "I suppose it's too much to expect that you can fly?"

Bruce seemed shocked. "Excuse me?"

"I thought as much," he replied. Rachael and Buffy led us toward their cars parked nearby. I ended up riding with Buffy, as there wasn't enough room in Rachael's car.

PROGRESS

I THANK THE LORD ABOVE THAT YOU'RE NOT HERE
TO SEE ME IN THIS SHAPE I'M IN
SPENDING MY TIME - ROQUETTE

I had been to Nashville before, but this Nashville was very different. After leaving Brenda's neighborhood, the rest of the city seemed darker, colder. Many of the streetlights were out, leaving pools of darkness in the city. Several times I saw gangs roaming the street, humans moving quickly out of their way.

At one point, I saw a vampire feeding from a mortal under a streetlight. A police officer walked past them, sparing only a glance at the couple before moving on. The entire city seemed to have lost its hope. The streets and houses were dirty, run down. The only nice section of town seemed to be the one we'd just left.

The car behind us flashed its lights and Buffy pulled to the curb. The Spaniard, Brenda, Rafe and Bruce approached my side of the car. I got out to talk to them.

"The master is requiring our presence," the Spaniard said softly. "However, I think you should continue on to the airport. There is no reason to involve you if it is not necessary."

I shot Brenda an amused look. "Is he like this in every world?"

"Jason would like that," Bruce commented. I assumed he was talking about keeping me out of harms way, but as Bruce was generally cryptic, I couldn't be sure.

"We have to go see the master," Brenda said, "you don't."

My eyebrows shot up. "You don't want me to go?"

"No."

"Now you sound like Antonio."

She smiled. "Since when have I not sounded like our sire?"

"Good point," I agreed softly. "I guess I'll wait for you at the airport."

"I don't like the idea of you seeing the master," Buffy told them.

"Don't worry," Brenda replied. "We killed him once, we can kill him again."

Buffy was surprised. "You killed him?"

Brenda nodded. "Actually, you killed him with the sword you carry."

The former hunter seemed to ponder that information.

"Rafe," Brenda said to the man at her side, "I think you should go with Christina and help her secure the plane."

He seemed distracted and barely glanced at her. "Okay." Brenda leaned closer and kissed him, then whispered something in his ear. He opened the back door of the car and got inside without replying.

"I'll see you at the plane," I told them.

"It was good to see you, Christina," the Spaniard told me. He moved closer and hugged me.

"I'm sorry I couldn't be your childe, Spaniard," I whispered in his ear.

He pulled back and cupped my face. "You will always be my childe, Christina," he said earnestly. "At least I know that somewhere you live and are happy."

I smiled. Whether I would be happy was something I had yet to discover. "Take care of yourself, Antonio," I replied. With one last look at my face, he turned and followed the others to Rachael's car.

I got back into Buffy's car and she pulled away from the curb toward the airport. While she drove, she glanced over at me from time to time. When she stopped for a traffic light, she turned to me. "You're dating Jason Kline in your world?"

I glanced at her face. "Sort of," I told her. "We dated a long time ago."

"Bruce talked like you were dating now," she said. "And that you were dating someone else?"

"Someone else?" I guess I had missed that comment. "I have an... assistant," I murmured.

"A human servant?" she asked.

I nodded. "Yeah, you have them?"

"Some vamps do, I don't." She sounded a little offended.

"Well, he's my first one," I told her defensively. "I thought I could use the help."

"And Jason doesn't like your servant?"

"I don't know," I replied. "I didn't get the opportunity to ask." I looked out the window at the buildings we were passing, not really seeing them.

"I know that Jason was a hunter in this world," Buffy commented. "What is he in yours?"

"He was a hunter," I said softly, "a long time ago. A very strong vampire made him a... servant. Two years ago, he was forcibly embraced. I couldn't find him in time to stop it."

"I bet that hit him pretty hard."

"It did. He lost his looks, his faith, his humanity," I whispered. I blinked my tears away. "He couldn't handle it and went underground. Literally. I started dating someone else, but that ended rather abruptly."

"What happened?"

I glanced into the back seat at Rafe. He seemed to be rather distracted. There was a look on his face that I didn't particularly like seeing, almost as if his world had collapsed around him. I had seen that look on Luke's face just before he'd pulled his disappearing act.

I turned back to Buffy. "He realized that I would never love him," I told her. "I'd never given up on Jason, even though I'd told myself I had."

"It's so weird that you didn't marry Talon in your world," she said softly. "You really loved him, you gave up your life to make sure his death was avenged."

I smiled grimly as Buffy pulled into the airport. "I guess no matter what world I'm in, I love the same way." I would gladly have given up my life if it would have saved Jason from being embraced.

We fell silent as she drove toward the back of the airport. She parked in front of an isolated hanger, and the three of us got out of the car.

"The Spaniard just got back into town tonight," Buffy told me. "He went to Helena to visit your father."

"Papa?" I asked, unsure why he would have done that.

"Your father refused to send your things to you after your change," she explained. "You—rather, Christina asked the Spaniard to see if he could get them for her. That's why he was out of town when..."

"When she died," I finished.

"The Spaniard was able to get her stuff," she added. "Maybe there are some things you can use. He told me he left the plane in such a hurry that he left everything on board."

"I would feel kind of strange going through her things," I said. "She wasn't really me."

"Yeah, I guess," she replied. "Look, I'm gonna head over to the Iron to make sure the Spaniard makes it out okay. The master doesn't really like him."

"Okay. Look, Buffy?"

She turned to look at me.

"Can you take care of him for me?" I asked softly. "I don't know what your relationship is with him, but I know in my world he is a good man. I can't imagine that he would be much different here."

"Not a problem," she told me. "I like the Spaniard, he's one of the few decent vampires in town. Maybe if he were the master things would be different."

"I'm sure they would be."

Buffy got into her car and I watched her drive away, thinking about what my life had been like here. It's amazing how just a few small changes can make such big differences.

"Shall we go in?" Rafe asked.

"Sure." I turned and followed him to the plane. The pilot was expecting us, and he led us into the main cabin, where there were several comfortable couches. Rafe sat down without a word, but I couldn't be still for that long. I paced, casting glances at Brenda's ghoul whenever I was facing him. I've never been any good at waiting, especially without anyone to talk to.

"Rafael," I said softly after he had been silent too long.

"Hmm?" he replied distantly.

"It seems like Brenda Moorecock has quite a life for herself here," I told him, watching his face. I walked over to sit on the couch opposite him.

Pain flickered across his features. "Yeah."

"Married to Michael, two point whatever kids, house with a white picket fence," I added.

He closed his eyes.

"Brenda seemed hit pretty hard by the whole thing," I said, trying to break through his dejection. "I guess it would seem like she wished it were her."

"Yeah," he whispered.

I shook my head at the stupidity of men in general. "Do you love Brenda?" I asked harshly.

That got his attention. "What?"

"Do you love my sister?" I asked again.

"Of course I do," he said indignantly.

"Do you think she loves you?"

"She says she does," he said quietly.

"Brenda doesn't lie," I told him. "If she says she does, then she does."

He blinked, thinking about it. After a moment, he nodded. "She does."

"I know Michael in our world," I stated bluntly. "I know that he loves Brenda. But I also know that he's a overbearing, egotistical jerk."

Rafael just sat there looking at me as if I had gone insane.

"He wants to be human again, and he used Brenda to pretend that he could be," I told him. "He'll never forgive her for being Kindred. And Brenda doesn't give up on relationships easily," I added firmly. "If she has committed herself to you, then you're the one she wants to be with. Are you going to let some asshole you don't even know stand in the way of that?"

He looked away, but I could see the wheels turning inside of his mind. I smiled grimly.

"Brenda needs someone who will be there for her," I said ruthlessly. "Someone who will be there when she needs him, but also someone who will stand up to her when she needs that too. Can you be that for her, Rafe? Or will you just keep running scared whenever Michael's name comes up?"

At last I saw fire in his eyes. I hid the smug grin that threatened and leaned back against the headrest. "You have to stand up for what you want with her, Rafe," I told him kindly. "She obviously wants you, don't let her get away."

"If you know so much about this," he asked slowly, "why did you let Luke Thomas get away?"

I blinked at his audacity, angry at first. Then I laughed. "That's the spirit," I replied with a nod. "I let Luke get away because I knew from the beginning that being with him wasn't what I wanted," I answered in a voice that was much calmer than I felt. "I never lied to him, never told him that I loved him. I didn't, I couldn't. I knew Luke long before I met Jason, but once he came into my life, there was no one else for me, ever. I ended up with Luke on the rebound, when I was trying my best to get over Jason."

"How do you know that's not what Brenda is trying to do here?" he demanded.

I smiled and shook my head. "Brenda isn't like that and you should know that by now," I chastised him. "If you don't know it, you don't deserve her." I closed my eyes and pretended to rest while we waited for the others. I made myself sit still, knowing that pacing wouldn't help the situation.

When they came in, I looked up and Rafe got to his feet. Brenda didn't say a word, just sat down on one of the couches. Rafe watched her with his heart in his eyes, then sat down again. I greeted Bruce and Rachael and Bruce sat next to me on the couch while Rachael went up to inform the pilot that we could take off. Within minutes we were in the sky.

Bruce told me that Wyatt was now dead and that the Spaniard had every intention of taking over the city. After a few minutes, he turned to speak with Rachael and I looked at Brenda. She sat with her legs pulled up and Rafe's jacket covering her to her chin. She almost looked as if she were going to cry. A glance at Rafe showed that he was also watching her. I didn't like the look on his face any more now than I had in the car earlier.

Brenda, I called to her mind.

She jerked a little and looked at me. *Yeah?*

I didn't want to have to do this, but I felt it was necessary. *Are you planing on staying in this world?* I asked rather harshly.

Her eyes widened in surprise. *What are you talking about? Of course I don't.*

Do you plan on getting back with Michael when we get back to our world?

No, she said firmly. I could feel the truth of her words.

Then why are you blowing it with ghouls?

She looked at Rafael in confusion. He sat near her but not close enough to touch. He had dropped his eyes and was studying his clasped hands.

What has he said? she demanded.

I didn't want to bring back bad memories for myself, but then I didn't want to watch Brenda go through what I had either. *Its what he hasn't said.* I told her. *You know, he really reminds me of Luke the night he saw me go for the ring.*

She laid the jacket aside and put one foot on the ground, studying Rafe's face.

Do you want to lose him? Are you just going to let this happen? I asked softly.

No.

I hid a smile. *Then you had better do something about it,* I told her.

She leaned over and put her hand in his. He jumped in surprise and looked up at her.

"Come with me," she whispered.

"Okay," he replied tonelessly. They rose and walked to the room at the back of the airplane.

After a while I got up and started to pace. I let the drone of Bruce's conversation with Rachael fade into the background like the white noise of the airplane's engines. I was worried about Jason and Frasier. I hoped that they hadn't come to this world, because I had no way of finding them if they had.

I turned to walk toward the back of the plane and was startled to come face to face with Bruce.

"What's the matter?" he asked me.

I looked away and shrugged. "Nothing."

He gestured toward the matted carpeting where I had been pacing. "I don't think the owner would be too appreciative of you wearing a hole through the hull."

I turned and walked toward the other side of the plane. "Okay, I'll pace over there for a while."

Bruce followed me. "Why don't you have a seat," he asked. "Take a drink, try to relax."

A glance at his face told me that he only wanted to make me feel better. I shrugged and sat down near Rachael. Bruce brought me a glass of red wine and I took it reluctantly. As I sipped the wine, Bruce talked to us about inconsequential matters, distracting me from my worries.

Bruce told me that the Angel from our world had somehow crossed over to this one and that he knew the spell required to return us home. He also said that Cormac and Nina had located the ring Angel would need to perform the ritual and that we would be able to get to it during a club opening the next night.

I didn't notice the time passing, didn't even notice when Brenda and Rafe stepped out of the back compartment until Brenda cleared her throat.

Rafe went to the jacket he'd been wearing and took out the articles that we had found in the apartment about the other Brenda and Christina. We all read through them, and it was amazing that our lives had been so much different here, yet still so much the same.

Before I realized it, the time flew by and the airplane landed at the Salem International Airport. A limousine was waiting for us, apparently alerted to our visit by the Spaniard. It was nice to think that Antonio was looking after us in this world as he had in ours.

While the others looked around at the unfamiliar airport, I got into the limousine and waited impatiently for them. They took far too long getting inside, but eventually we were on our way to Jesters.

CITY OF DARKNESS

'CAUSE I AM SLEEPING ON A TIME BOMB
AND I AM WAITING FOR THE LIGHT TO COME
WE ARE - VERTICAL HORIZONS

As with Nashville, this city seemed much different from the one in our world. This Salem had been on the decay for a long time. What was once a beautiful city was now filled with empty homes and abandoned businesses. Ruined and stripped cars lined the streets in some areas, making it difficult to park. The people seemed thinner, meaner than their counterparts in our world. Vampires seemed to be on every street corner, willing to feed for money, or even turn someone if the offer was good enough.

The whole city had taken on a dark Gothic personality, as if the city's spirit had grown dark and bitter, affecting everyone who entered with a hopelessness and anger that was difficult to fight off. The change in the city made the others a little upset, although Rachael didn't seem bothered by it.

"It's a little different, isn't it?" Rafe commented softly.

Brenda nodded. "It's a lot different."

"It's different in your world?" Rachael asked, surprised.

"Happier," Bruce told her.

We pulled into the parking lot of Jesters and the limousine stopped by the door. We climbed out and waited for Bruce to put his sword back in its sheath on his back. The music coming from the club was hard and heavy, the lyrics dark and depressing.

"Is this what the Jesters is like in your world?" I asked, looking at Brenda in confusion.

She just shook her head and headed for the door.

We went inside and took a quick look around. The walls of the bar were covered with spray paint and obscenities. The patrons were loud and dirty, mostly biker and gangster types. I spotted some Kindred in the crowd, but I thought that most of them were humans until Rafe spoke up.

"What is this, a werewolf convention?" he muttered to Brenda.

Bruce glanced at him sharply. "There's guardians here?"

"Guardians?" Rachael asked in amazement, shaking her head. "Let's go upstairs, shall we?" She gestured toward a pair of doors to our left.

While I strode quickly toward those doors, I heard a few suggestive comments from the crowd, but I ignored them. Both doors were marked 'Employees Only', but I disregarded the warning and opened the door on the left to reveal stairs going up. I went inside and was nearly to the top of those stairs when Brenda called out to me.

"Chris!"

I turned to see that the others were all inside the stairwell and the door to the bar was closed. I let go of the doorknob. "What?"

As they started up the stairs, Brenda said, "Do you want to get shot walking into something blindly? Have you forgotten everything that you know?"

I raised my eyebrow at her and took a step away from the door. *You are the Mother but not my mother*, I told her in a mental warning.

Well if you didn't act like an impertinent childe and walk into a situation blindly, she chastised me, then perhaps I wouldn't have to act like your mother. I understand that you have a strong need to return to our world, but—

Acting as if I were bored, I pulled out my gun and popped the clip to make sure it was fully loaded, then snapped the clip back in. I put the gun back in its holster and waited patiently for Brenda to finish.

That's more like it, she told me with satisfaction.

I leaned against the wall with my arms crossed under my breasts and one leg cocked over the other, unconsciously copying a stance that was as natural to Luke as feeding.

It won't do Jason any good if you just jump into things, Brenda added with a sly smile.

She knew too well what to say to make me start concentrating again. I lifted an eyebrow and took another step away from the door, quickly resuming my stance and meowing at her like a cat as she walked by.

Brenda took out her gun and crouched near the door. She reached out slowly for the doorknob and glanced over her shoulder. "Get back," she whispered at us.

Bruce kept Rachael behind him and backed down a few steps. As Brenda prepared to turn the knob, the door opened and she let go, quickly aiming her gun for the opening.

"Ladies," Cormac said softly. I smiled. Even in the stress of this other world, he still found the ability to be polite.

"How ya doin' Cormac?" I asked with a smile.

"Well," he told me. His gaze took in my casual stance and Brenda's gun, which was now pointed at the ceiling. "Could you enter please?"

I straightened and strode past Brenda, who was putting her gun away. "Sure. It's a little drafty out here."

He stepped back to allow me to pass. "Thank you. Mind the bloodstain and the bitch in the chair."

Brenda had told me that Cormac had killed the Micky in this world, but I wasn't prepared to see his body still lying on the conference table nearly decapitated from a point blank gunshot wound. Blood and other body fluids stained the carpet and the nearby chairs. I walked in that direction almost despite myself then leaned back against the wall trying to take it in.

I glanced up to see a pretty blond dressed in leather sitting across from Micky with a cocky look on her face. She appeared to be bound to the chair.

"Micky's looked better," Bruce said softly. Then he saw the girl opposite the body. "Why is she tied up in the chair?"

Cormac closed and locked the door but didn't reply. Rachael walked over to Faith and they hugged briefly. Cormac joined Angel and a young girl at the end of the table.

Brenda stood just inside the doorway in shock looking at Micky's body, Rafe at her side. After a minute she looked around the room, searching for something. She saw the girl and walked over to her, glancing at Cormac as she passed him. "Nice job," she shot in a low voice.

"Thank you," he replied coolly, not even glancing up at her. The front of his suit was covered with blood and gore as well. He must have been standing pretty close to Micky when he'd killed him to be splattered that badly.

Brenda approached the girl and reached for a scarf that was tied around her upper arm. With a start I realized that the scarf was covered with the Brujah symbol and that the girl was Sarah Hamilton. She gave Brenda a brittle smile, and abruptly an angry, cold power flowed through the room.

Before Brenda could touch the scarf, Cormac called out to stop her. "Don't touch her, please," he said quickly.

Sarah nodded. "Go ahead, take it," she encouraged Brenda.

Brenda looked down at her and reached again for the scarf.

Cormac shook his head. "Don't say I did not warn you."

I straightened in shock when a line of blood appeared on the back of Brenda's outstretched hand. She pulled her hand back, looking at the bleeding wound. She brought it to her mouth and licked it, but the scratch didn't close. As I watched, it closed slowly, and I knew that Brenda was manipulating the blood within her to heal it.

Brenda turned to Nina. "She appears to be a bitch."

Sarah smiled widely despite the band of darkness that had appeared around her eyes, effectively blindfolding her. "Why, thank you, thank you very much." The power grew stronger, making it difficult for me to concentrate.

Cormac walked over to the girl and tried to move between her and Brenda, but my sister wouldn't allow it. He gave her a cold look and went around to the girl's other side to sit on the table. He pulled his gun from the holster and pressed it against her forehead. The young girl followed and stood at his shoulder looking like she would pull the trigger for him if he gave her the chance.

"I killed Micky like the dog he was," he told her in a low serious voice, "I'll kill you like the bitch you are." He pressed the gun against her head hard enough to rock it backward. "Knock it off and shut up."

Frankly I was amazed at the change in Cormac's attitude. He hadn't seemed quite so forceful before, but perhaps the situation had brought out his inner strength.

"Cormac," Bruce said, taking a step closer, "right now she's the only one in the room that has information about this area."

Cormac smiled grimly. "Like hell she is."

Faith spoke up for the first time. "No, she's not."

Bruce shrugged, but I could tell he was concerned for Sarah's welfare. "Well, the others may, but—"

Cormac gestured toward the girl at his side. "Bruce, have you met the other Cormac's wife, Eliza?"

"Have you met Faith?" Nina asked from behind Bruce.

Bruce gave both them a courtly bow. "Greetings, ladies."

Sarah took a breath as if to speak and Nina stepped closer to the group.

Brenda raised her hand. "Your rash actions have already cost one life tonight, do we really need to have two?"

"Brenda," Nina told her firmly, "you said yourself, she's a bitch."

"Yeah," she replied softly, "but that doesn't mean she doesn't know something we might need to know."

Nina shook her head. "She's been like this all night long."

Brenda looked at Nina in surprise. "Have you been hanging around Chris lately?"

"As a matter of fact," Nina replied with a smile, "yes."

I rolled my eyes and straightened angrily. "Where do I get this reputation? You'd think I kill everybody I meet."

"You're also looking at the fact that she may have a mental connection with the master," Bruce said quietly, "and could be telling her everything that is going on right now in this room."

Cormac looked down at Sarah in silence for a few minutes. I leaned back against the wall, and watched quietly. The power continued to swirl around the room and I rubbed my arms against the chill it caused.

After a few minutes, Cormac pushed the gun against Sarah's forehead brutally. "Drop it," he demanded. A long moment later the power was gone as if it had never existed.

"Thank you," Cormac said quietly. He left the gun where it was and the shadows covering Sarah's eyes disappeared. "Please don't," he added when Brenda reached again for the scarf.

She glanced at his face. "I just want to cover Micky's head."

Sarah looked up at Cormac questioningly. I wondered if he remembered telling her not to speak. He paused dramatically, then raised the gun and clicked on the safety. He sat the gun on the table in front of her so that she could see it plainly.

Sarah seemed to have lost some of the cockiness she had had, but certainly not all of it. I believe it was part of her personality more than a result of the situation she was in. She looked up at Brenda. "By all means," she told her. "I don't like to look at dinner when I can't have it."

Brenda rolled her eyes, but untied the scarf quickly. She walked around the table and dropped it across the mess that had been Micky's head. She quickly walked back around the table and sat down a few seats away from Sarah, resting her head in her hands.

Everyone watched her closely, and I think we all suspected she was trying something. After a few minutes she took a deep shuddering breath and sat back in the chair. Rafe put his hands on her shoulders and leaned down to whisper in her ear.

"So," I asked with a smile, "what kind of spooky-boo, Bren?"

Brenda took another deep breath, and glanced first at Rafe, then at me. "The little trick that our sire taught us paid off," she said meaningfully.

My eyebrows rose. "Really? I'm assuming that you didn't get a hold of our sire." I hadn't been able to contact anyone earlier in the evening.

"No," she said slowly. "I got a hold of the master of the city."

Sarah and Nina both looked at Brenda with surprise written on their faces.

Bruce simply shook his head. "You guys really got to teach me that."

I laughed softly and Brenda echoed my mirth. "We need to teach a whole lot of people that," I told him, "but we have to check with our sire first."

"And the council as well," Brenda added. Her smile faded and she looked around the room as if trying to decide just whom we could trust.

Faith put a hand on the table and leaned toward Brenda. "And how did you get a hold of the master?"

She returned Faith's questioning gaze with an even look. "Is this not an ability that you have?"

"Not to just snap my fingers and talk to the master, no," she said firmly. "Not that I'd want to."

"It's a spooky-boo mental thing," Bruce added.

Faith looked at him, puzzled. "What is this 'spooky-boo'?"

"Magic," he replied. The room plunged into darkness for just a moment, then the light levels returned to normal. I saw Cormac look at Bruce speculatively.

Brenda tried to stand and almost fell. Rafe grabbed her arm and steadied her to her feet. She looked at Cormac who was still sitting on the table next to Sarah. "How much do you have her under control?"

He looked down at Sarah, who still seemed amused by the entire situation. "Well enough for the moment."

"Can we discuss strategy in front of her?" Brenda wondered aloud.

Sarah did her best to look innocent, but I don't think she fooled anyone in the room.

"I would prefer not to," Cormac replied.

Brenda nodded. "Very well. Would we like to go upstairs? Has anyone been up there?"

"I have," Nina spoke up.

"Is it like I described?"

"Yes it was."

"Let's go up there," Brenda suggested.

Eliza walked around the table and reached down the front of Micky's pants. As I blinked in shock, she removed a large wooden cross and cleaned it on his pant leg. Faith and Sarah actually hissed at her, while Nina simply turned her head.

"Can you put that away?" Nina asked calmly.

Cormac joined her and pulled a gun from his waistband as she tucked the cross into an inside pocket of her jacket. "I can watch these two," she told Cormac.

Brenda seemed to notice Eliza for the first time. "Let me guess," she asked, "you're a hunter aren't you?"

"Yeah," she replied bluntly. "Why, am I in your world too? 'Cause he said he doesn't know me."

"Oh, yeah," Brenda said with a smile. "You're in my world. We've had many conversations."

Cormac looked between the two women with interest as they spoke. Eliza took the gun from him and checked the bullets.

"Are you going to leave her in charge?" Brenda asked uncertainly.

"Do you have a better choice?" he said softly.

She shook her head. "I really don't know." She looked at Faith, but I could tell she didn't know if we could trust her. If we had been in our world, I knew we could have trusted her implicitly, but this wasn't our world. "Faith, I'm sorry."

Bruce smiled. "Sometimes you just have to have Faith," he punned.

I rolled my eyes; I didn't want to hear any talk about faith at that point, my patience was at its end. I headed for the door next to the one we had come in. "Where's upstairs?" I asked. "Is it this door here?"

"Ok," Bruce protested, "it was bad, but come on."

I shot him a disgruntled look. "Don't talk to me about faith," I warned him. I had had enough of that from Antonio, not to mention Jason.

"Yeah," Brenda told me. "That door leads upstairs."

I opened the door and looked up to make sure the stairway was clear before I started upwards. Then I remembered something I hadn't asked. "Angel," I turned and called softly.

He looked at me. "Yeah?"

"Who else swapped worlds?" I asked. "Are we it or did someone else change places too?"

"As far as I know, this is it," he told me. "Everyone from our world is here in this room."

"Jason and Frasier are still where they are supposed to be?"

"Yeah," he replied. "They're helping Micky and Ford go after the Sabbat."

I took a deep shaky breath. Jason and Frasier were still in our world, but that didn't make them safe. We needed to get back. I needed to make sure they were safe, that Jason was safe. I turned to walk up the stairs.

"Are the others being treated well?" I heard Eliza demand softly.

"Elvira is making sure that they are contained but comfortable." Angel replied.

I entered the living room and sat on the end of a long curved couch. I tried to relax, but it was nearly impossible. The others followed me in, and Brenda told us that she would take a look around for 'refreshments.'

Cormac and Nina followed Brenda into what I assumed was the living quarters. Bruce walked over to look at the musical instruments that lined one wall, while Angel found a control panel and lowered a screen that showed the bar below us. I put my head back and tried to keep calm. I didn't have much luck.

BEST LAID PLANS

I'VE LOST SENSE OF TIME AND ALL SEASONS

I FEEL I'VE BEEN BEATEN DOWN

CREED - WHAT IF

A few minutes later, Nina and Cormac reentered the room bickering. I couldn't resist asking, "What, Jason's not here so you two feel you need to argue?" They didn't seem to hear me.

"Interesting," Brenda told them. "He must have gotten the box from Idella at some point. Are you supposed to return the box after you're done?"

"It was never said so," Nina replied, "but I'm assuming we are."

"We were told to keep it safe," Cormac added.

Angel looked over at them. "What box?" he asked.

"Nina has some vitae dots if you need some," Brenda told him.

Antonio had given Nina a box of Thaumaturgically prepared marbles for her journey to Las Vegas a few weeks ago. When a Kindred touched one of the marbles, they absorbed blood into their bodies and the marble disappeared. Each marble was roughly the equivalent of a pint of blood, but I'd seen similar objects made from the blood of elders that held much more.

He looked at the box in Nina's hands. "You know, it was a taxing ritual, do you mind?" When Nina shook her head, he reached inside intending to take sustenance from the beads in the top of the box.

Brenda's voice stopped him. "Angel, the top, no. You don't want that yet."

He shrugged and reached for the beads in the bottom. Nina asked the rest of us if we needed the vitae, and Bruce and I walked over to partake as well. Cormac went back downstairs to talk to Eliza and Faith.

Brenda looked at each of us. "What's our plan?"

"That's a good question," Angel replied. "Anyone know who lives here?"

"Sarah owns the place," Nina told him.

"Well, we've got Sarah, I suppose we could stay here," he said. "It's not like the owner is going to come looking."

"I'm sure there are things we can do for defense," Brenda added.

Angel agreed. "And we have a couple of humans who can guard during the day. What time was Elvira supposed to be at Guilty Pleasures?"

"Seven," Brenda stated.

He nodded. "The sun goes down at six."

"We know what door is hers to enter through," Brenda told him. "Downstairs when I was doing the whole concentration thing—"

"Spooky-boo thing," Bruce interjected.

"I attempted and was successful in mentally contacting Elvira in this world," she continued. "We pretty much struck up a bargain that we kill Beth and Akari and she gives us the ring."

I frowned. "I thought Elvira was a bad guy in this world, can we trust her?"

"We can trust her as far as we need to," Brenda replied. "I know the rest of you don't, but I have a certain amount of loyalty to this individual. If she shows that she isn't worthy of my loyalty, then she won't have it."

"That means Brenda will cap her," I clarified for the others.

She shook her head at me. "Now Chris, I've never capped anyone yet."

I just looked at her and didn't say a word.

"Well, there was the one," she admitted, "but anyhow. We'll stay here the day then. Is there anything else we need to go over?"

"As far as I know, no," Angel replied. "I have everything I need for the ritual. Faith can show us where Guilty Pleasures is and we need to get there right after sundown and get into place."

Brenda turned to Rafe. "Can you check around for some feathers?"

"Feathers?" he said before realizing why she wanted them. Feathers are used in a Tremere ritual that allowed the Kindred to wake instantly during the day if there is any danger. "I'll check, maybe there's a comforter or something. Or maybe the lab." He kissed Brenda on the cheek then disappeared down the hall.

Brenda walked to the stairs and opened the door, calling, "Cormac, could you bring everyone upstairs please?"

Cormac asked Bruce to help him with Sarah, and Rafe returned to pass out feathers to all of the Tremere. As the two men carried Sarah in her chair into the room, Brenda asked Eliza if she minded staying with us.

"Do you have a problem being in a room with sleeping vampires?" Brenda added.

"No," she replied, "I just have to make a phone call. Also, I'm supposed to be at Guilty Pleasures at five o'clock tomorrow night."

"That shouldn't be a problem," Brenda told her. She sent Rafe in to one of the bedrooms to sleep. He was to wake up later in the day and take over guarding us.

Cormac handed Eliza his cell phone and she went back to the conference room. Cormac followed her and I wondered why he didn't trust her. A few minutes later, Eliza returned alone.

The others were involved in an intense discussion of battle plans that Nina seemed about as interested in as I was. That is to say, not at all, so I moved down the couch to sit beside her. "How was the flight back from the holding?"

She glanced at me. "Spiffy."

I didn't want to ask, but somehow I had to. "Did Jason say anything on the flight?"

"Not really," she said. "He kept pretty much to himself. You know, I don't know Jason very well."

"So," I asked nonchalantly, "when you guys got to the chantry and I wasn't there, what happened?"

Nina was a little clearer on the details than Bruce had been. She told me that Frasier had come downstairs and told Elvira that something was going on. Everyone had gone upstairs, but Brenda wouldn't let anyone into my room except Frasier and Micky. When Jason had finally gotten inside, he'd tripped out. Nina had tried to go in, but my cross had driven her back out. She stopped for a moment, remembering.

"I think Jason flipped out from the cross," she told me.

"The cross?"

"You know," she prompted, "like how I freak out."

I didn't understand. "Why would that happen?"

"I don't know," she replied. "He wore the big old cross himself in Ramadan."

"And I wore my cross," I added, remembering him seeing me in only the camisole and my necklaces when he'd come into my room to talk. "He didn't react then."

"I know," she agreed, "but he did in your room."

I shook my head, knowing that what she told me didn't make sense. "He doesn't have a problem with crosses," I insisted as I noticed that Cormac had returned and the others were checking their weapons.

Nina noticed as well, and she checked her knives for their draw prompting me to do the same. Then to my amazement, she pulled out a gun and proceeded to check the clip.

"Nina," I exclaimed. "You believe!"

"No," she said with a smile, "but I have an idea."

I laughed. "I'm so proud of you," I told her.

"You know, I don't know if I'll keep it," she admitted.

"Just make sure I'm not in front of you when you fire," I told her, grinning.

She grinned back. "I was just going to caution you about that."

Brenda bid us all goodnight and went down the hall to find Rafe. Cormac followed with the intention of finding clean clothing, as his were a bit of a mess.

"Would you ladies like to find a bedroom to sleep in as well?" Nina asked us.

"Is there a second bedroom here?" I inquired.

"Yeah," she said, "the bed is pretty big, too."

Rachael offered to take the couch, and she watched with Faith while Nina and I performed the Tremere ritual 'Wake With Morning's Freshness.' We burned the feathers and laid down, Nina still holding the box of vitae. I felt Faith get into the bed with us just as I sensed the sunrise and sleep claimed me. I dreamed.

GUILTY PLEASURES

IT WAS THE WRONG PLACE, WRONG TIME
WRONG END OF A GUN
GOD IS A BULLET - CONCRETE BLONDE

I woke instantly the moment the sun went down. Immediately I realized that Faith was no longer beside me and that she and Rachael were gone from the room. Nina sat up and looked around. We could hear the sound of running water coming from behind the closed bathroom door. Nina and I exchanged glances, both of us wondering how the two vampires had managed to wake before the sun went down.

Nina walked over to the bathroom door and knocked loudly.

"Yeah?" came the reply. It was Faith.

"Faith," Nina called out, "are you going to be much longer?"

"No," she said, "I'm almost done."

"When did you wake up?" Nina asked.

"About an hour ago. You guys were asleep, so I thought I'd get ready."

"That's kind of weird," Nina murmured.

The water stopped. "Vampires don't wake up before sundown in your world?" Faith asked.

"Not usually, no."

"When you get older here, you do," she told her. "The older the vamp the earlier they can wake up."

That was interesting to hear. I wondered just how old Faith was.

"Just a few minutes," Faith added.

I found a brush and quickly removed the tangles from my hair. I checked my guns while Nina brushed her hair then we went into the living room. The others were in various locations around the room. Rafe was in a chair by the door, watching Sarah, who was still tied to her own chair. Rachael was near Bruce talking to him softly, and Angel looked as if he were contemplating a dark future. Cormac was just finishing changing his clothing.

I walked over to stand by Rafe, very much impatient to be underway. The quicker we got this over with, the quicker I would be with Jason again.

Brenda joined us and glanced around. "What kind of vehicles do we have?" she asked.

Cormac looked up from buttoning his shirt. "No one has asked."

Faith followed Brenda into the room in time to hear the question. "I drove here," she told us. "I assume Sarah has a car here."

Brenda looked at Sarah, who shrugged. "I have one." She glanced at Cormac. "Micky had a car too."

Cormac bent to his discarded pants and removed a set of keys from one of the pockets. "I have the keys."

"Lifting things from dead people again?" I asked him with a smile.

He turned to me. "I was trying to get information just in case," he replied coolly.

"You're not going to tell me you gave them to your sire years ago?" I said, referring to his response when I'd questioned him about the watch he'd taken from a dead hunter in Vegas.

Nina laughed, but Cormac ignored me.

"Sarah," Brenda asked, "where's your keys?"

She looked up at Brenda and smiled. "In my pocket."

"Can I have them?"

Sarah looked cautiously at Cormac, who was strapping on his shoulder holster.

He glanced in their direction. "Don't untie her yet," he warned Brenda.

"By the way," Brenda asked, "are we taking her?"

Cormac nodded. "Yes, she is our insurance policy to the matter we discussed." He pulled his jacket on and adjusted it quickly.

"Gotcha," she replied as she bent to get Sarah's keys from her pocket.

Sarah looked up at her. "You know this really isn't comfortable," she said softly. "You could loosen this a little bit."

Cormac walked over to them. "We will in just a minute," he told her sternly.

Brenda got the keys out and straightened. She stepped away to check her guns and Cormac looked down at Sarah.

"You can get up now," he told her.

To my amazement, Sarah stood quite easily, the ropes that had held her falling to the ground. It was obvious that she had loosened them during the day, although why she hadn't tried to get away or kill anyone was beyond me. Cormac handed her a gun, informing her that the bullets in it were silver and wouldn't harm the vampires from our world at all.

It was decided that I would go with Cormac in Micky's car as I was the only Kindred besides Brenda who would not be immediately recognized, and she wouldn't leave Rafe. The rest of our group would take Faith and Sarah's cars.

Cormac and I went outside and looked around for the Buick that Sarah had described to us. I didn't argue when he got into the driver's seat, I was way too wound up to drive. Cormac took a look around, then picked up a pair of sunglasses sitting on the dash and put them on.

I smiled, remembering a well-known television commercial. "You don't really think that's going to protect you from the sun, do you?"

He gestured toward the road. "Headlights."

"Are we wearing our sunglasses at night?" I asked, referring to a song that had been popular long before my embrace.

He shot me an irritated look. "Find something interesting in the glove box."

"Okay," I told him, knowing when I was pushing too far. "Look, here's a city map," I said facetiously. Then I pulled out a large pistol. "Check out this gun," I breathed softly.

"What?" he said, apparently surprised that I had indeed found something interesting.

It was a large handgun, the make of which I wasn't familiar with. I popped the clip and looked at the bullets. "These are silver," I told him as I slid the clip back in. I tucked the gun in my waistband. The only other things in the glove box were a few Jesters tapes and a small photograph of the group. For a moment I mourned the life of this Micky, knowing that he couldn't have been as happy as the Micky in our world.

Following Sarah's directions, Cormac drove quickly to Guilty Pleasures. He parked near the alley that ran behind the building. He took out his handgun and clicked off the safety, then put the sunglasses on the seat. On impulse, I picked them up and put them on.

He shot me an amused look. "Stealing from the dead are we?" Before I could reply, he got out of the car.

I smiled and followed suit. "Hey," I called after him, "at least I didn't take it off of his body."

We walked down the alley to a door marked 'Guilty Pleasures: Employees Only.' Cormac knocked loudly, and a moment later a well-built human opened the door. He matched the description of Devin that Eliza had given us, and he looked Cormac and I over quite thoroughly, making me a little uncomfortable with his scrutiny. It was obvious that he knew what we were. Finally, he stepped aside to let us in, closing the door firmly behind us.

The bar was nearly empty, with only a few people at the bar, a couple using one of the pool tables, and the DJ setting up in his booth. The only other people in the room wore clothing similar to that of the man who'd let us in, so I felt safe in assuming they worked there. Once again I wondered where Luke was in this world, and if seeing him here would count against the time I needed to break the blood bond.

"Is Elvira here?" Cormac asked softly.

Devin shook his head. "As far as I know she isn't supposed to be here until seven." He opened a nearby door revealing a stairway lit by a single bulb.

I nodded to Devin as we walked past him. Cormac accompanied me to the bottom of the stairs and made sure that I was all set before going back upstairs. He would wait for Elvira and Beth outside, pretending to be the Cormac from this world. I hoped he could play the role convincingly.

As I waited, I thought about Jason and Luke. I knew I had to ask Jason about his visits to my apartment. I didn't like to think he had seen me with Luke in the past year that we'd been lovers, but I knew there was a distinct possibility that he had.

Knowing the difficulty I had in not calling Luke, I wondered what he was going through. After all, I only had a partial blood bond to him while he was fully bonded to me. Had he started looking for me yet? Had he traced me to the Holding, called or maybe even flown there to find me? I hoped it took him a long time to track me to Salem, but I knew realistically that it probably wouldn't. He was well aware that my sister lived there.

And why was Jason in Salem? In my letter, I'd asked him to come to the city if he decided that he felt the same way for me that I did for him. Did he? Or had he come on a mission of mercy thinking I needed help because I'd left the Holding so quickly? The only way I would know for sure was for me to ask him, and I couldn't do that from this world. I closed my eyes and listened for movement from the other room.

Within five minutes, the door at the top of the stairs opened. I spun with my gun ready before I saw that Brenda was coming toward me, followed by the others.

"Everything quiet?" Brenda asked softly.

"I haven't heard anything," I replied.

"Let's go in and wait for them." She opened the door cautiously. "Do you think we should have someone on the stairwell?" she asked as we all filed into the room behind her.

"That's a good idea," Angel told her.

Bruce and Rachael offered to hold that position, and it was quickly determined that they could hear voices inside the room with the door closed.

"If you hear gunfire," Brenda said, "join us."

Rafe and Brenda stood toward the wall to the left of the elevator while the rest of us stood behind a bend in the wall that allowed us to be out of sight from the elevator doors. Brenda looked thoughtfully at the elevator for a few moments as if considering something.

"Christina," she whispered, "what side of the elevator are the controls on?"

I peeked around the corner to check, then pulled back. "The other side," I told her.

She made a face. "It figures."

"You act like I built the place or something," I whispered.

She shook her head then said, "Chris, your job as soon as everyone is off that elevator is to jam the controls somehow to make sure the doors don't close."

I raised an eyebrow. "You want me to stand over there?" Peeking around the corner again, I saw that there was barely enough room for me to hide from anyone on the elevator when the doors opened.

"Yeah."

No guts, no glory. "Okay," I replied aloud, then added, "just don't shoot me or anything."

"Famous last words," I heard Nina murmur.

I walked to the other side of the elevator and pulled my gun. I stood pressed into the corner and closed my eyes, gathering myself for the upcoming conflict. I hoped we could get through this quickly, kill who we needed to kill and leave Elvira under her own power as Brenda seemed hell bent to do. I really didn't care who ruled this Salem; I just wanted to go home. I wanted to be with Jason again. I refused to let myself think about Luke.

I heard the elevator rise to the first floor and straightened. I eased back on the trigger enough to release the safety and looked across the room to Brenda. Seeing her watching me, I extended the nails of my left hand where she could see the change. Her eyes widened.

The elevator started back down and we waited in silence. A few moments later, the panel slid open and I eased forward to put my foot against the door to keep it open. I raised my gun at the tall dark skinned man who exited. Brenda was quicker on the draw and immediately fired.

Unfortunately, either she hadn't taken the time to aim, or the man moved out of the way. Fire exploded in my side and I fell back into the corner, squeezing off a shot of my own as I went. My bullet hit Akari's shoulder and detonated, spinning him toward me. Another phosphorous round blew up in the wall above my head as I slid to the floor.

More shots rang out, but I was stunned and didn't see what was happening. The world seemed to freeze, time slowing to a crawl. I knew I was seriously injured and that I had to do something to save myself or the fire in my side would consume me. I closed my eyes and used blood to put out the blaze, but it would take a lot more than that to heal the damage Brenda's bullet had done to my body, more vitae than I had in me and days of rest. The most I could hope for was to stop the bleeding until I could get to some sort of blood supply and a peaceful place to hold up.

I tried to draw a deep breath, but the lung on that side of my chest was punctured. I was thankful that Kindred didn't need to breathe because it simply would have been impossible. Dimly I wondered if Luke had felt this way when he'd been near death in Nashville.

People spoke and the sounds of gunfire continued all around me, but I heard it as if from a distance. I let my mind drift and thought of Jason. I wondered if he was still in Salem. I wondered if he would wait for me until I could return. I wondered if he would take care of Frasier if I didn't.

I struggled to stay conscious, but I didn't think I could do that for very long. Out of nowhere, Brenda was kneeling beside me and I looked up, my eyes trying to focus on her face.

I looked up at Brenda and tried to smile. "Good shot, Brenda," I whispered.

"I'm so sorry, Chris," she said softly. There were blood tears on her face. She turned to someone I couldn't see. "Where is the box?"

"Right here," I heard Nina reply. The box seemed to materialize in front of me.

Brenda grabbed my hand and touched my finger against a small cold object. I felt something slide into my skin and realized that she was feeding me from the box that Nina had. I concentrated on

healing and the raw burning in my side receded somewhat and I felt the wound close a little, but I was still in agony. Brenda moved my hand again and I felt more blood enter my body.

I heard Rafe say something, but my eyes were closed and it felt like too much of an effort for me to open them. I felt power rise in the room, much like it had when the Spaniard had demonstrated his power for us. Brenda kept giving me more blood and I knew she was expecting me to continue healing myself, but I knew it wouldn't do any good for me to try. Wounds caused by fire took time as well as blood to heal, and I had done the best I could for myself tonight. Any further healing of the injury would have to wait until tomorrow.

I became more aware of things in the room, and heard Cormac talking to someone. "Are you going to kill him?"

"I'm thinking about it," Elvira replied.

"Are you going to kill him now?" he asked impatiently.

"Would you like the honors?" she offered.

I opened my eyes to see Cormac look at Angel. "Are you going to kill him?"

The Kindred took a step back. "By all means, be my guest."

Cormac shot the black vampire in the head, but he must have been using silver bullets, because the guy didn't die. Cormac shrugged and pulled out a stake. He thrust it through the heart, and the vampire crumbled to dust within moments.

Elvira breathed a sigh, but I couldn't tell if it was in relief or sorrow.

Cormac turned to a muscular red haired man standing near Bruce. "I apologize," he said. "I had to kill Sarah."

The man shrugged. "At least she's dead," he replied as he holstered his gun.

"Quite," Cormac murmured, trying to wipe the blood from his clothing.

Nina stood. "You're running out of clothing, dear," she said with a smile.

"You don't do my dry cleaning," he reminded her.

Eliza came up behind Cormac and laid a hand on his shoulder. "Are you okay?" she asked anxiously.

"Yes," he said, returning to his usual self. He turned to Elvira. "Your ring, milady."

With a glance to the dust at her feet, she pulled off her ring and handed it to Cormac, who in turn passed it to Angel.

"Now we just need someplace to do the ritual," the dark Kindred murmured.

"How much seclusion do you need?" Cormac asked.

Angel looked around. "I need a bigger room than this one."

"The building next door is empty," Eliza told them.

"How do we get in there?" Nina asked.

"We'll have to go outside and break in from the alley," Eliza replied.

Brenda helped me to my feet supported me while Cormac took my other arm and slung it around his neck. My sister called for Nina and the box once more and directed me to take from the blood in the top tray.

"Are you sure about giving her the big ones?" Nina asked.

"Whose are those?" Cormac inquired.

"They're a member of the primogen staff," Brenda replied vaguely.

"Whose are those?" Cormac repeated impatiently.

"From Vegas?" I asked softly.

"Yeah," she told me.

"Idella?" She was the Tremere Primogen in Vegas.

"Yeah."

We moved slowly up the stairs, my side pulling painfully with each step. As we stepped into the alley, Cormac released me and went back into the bar. Brenda leaned me up against the wall while we listened to Nina arguing with someone. We both jumped a little when gunfire rang out, but when Cormac and Nina quickly joined us we relaxed.

"Congratulations on your newly developed belief," Cormac said to his friend as he put my arm around his neck once more.

"It's an idea, not a belief," she corrected him. "And thank you, 'cause I've learned from the best."

"Jason?" I asked quietly, earning a laugh from Brenda as we approached the door to the empty building.

Eliza slammed her elbow through the window of the door and reached in to unlock it. We entered, careful of the debris on the floor. The area had obviously been a storeroom at one point, and there were shelves along the outside walls. Dust and rats competed for space on the floor.

Angel immediately pulled a bag of dirt from his pocket and began to lay out a circle about eight feet in diameter. Then he laid leaves on the four compass points.

"I did the best I could," Nina told him. "I hope that everything works out."

"Well, we really needed twine," he replied, "but we'll see if this ribbon works." He handed everyone a stone and instructed us to stand on the edge of the circle he'd made.

Brenda continued to support me, and Nina stood to my left. Angel stood beside her, then Bruce, Cormac and Rafael.

"Make sure you are touching Bruce," Brenda told Cormac. I knew she was worried about where he would end up because she had been touching him when they had come to this world.

Cormac pulled out a gun, loaded it with phosphorous rounds and laid it at his feet. He looked meaningfully at Eliza. "For your husband's safety, considering who had a gun on me when I came in," he told her with a glance at Nina. "And who else wants to kill me," he added, looking pointedly at Angel.

Eliza smiled. "Thank you." She walked around the circle to stand behind Nina. "Rachael, can you join me here so we can be prepared?" Rachael did so, and they stood behind Cormac's enemies, guns drawn.

Angel took out a small vial of blood and pulled the cork from it carefully. He handed it to Nina. "Just a sip is all it takes," he told her. "This is blood from one of the ghouls in Elvira's house, it will help ground us in our reality."

Everyone took a sip of the blood as it was passed around the circle. Angel drank the last of the vial's contents, then handed out small pieces of paper to each of us. I had to look at Brenda's, as I didn't have the strength to hold my own. I was starting to feel worse and could barely keep my feet, even with Brenda's support.

Angel took the black ribbon and tied it in a complex knot around the ring. He glanced at each of us before leading us in the ritual.

"Hail Hecate, goddess of hearth and home," we recited in unison. "Hail Bast, goddess of mystery and night. Hail Diana, goddess of the hunt. Hail Persephone, goddess of death and the afterlife. Hail goddesses, gather round."

I could feel myself growing weaker and struggled to remain conscious. I leaned heavier on Brenda, and she shifted to take more of my weight.

"We bring twine to bind us," we continued, although my voice had sunk to a whisper, "stone to rend us, leaves to teach us, earth to ground us."

The room swirled around me, and I knew I wouldn't make it through the ritual. My words were barely audible as I whispered with the others, "Return that which has been stolen, reverse that which has been done. Give us back our world."

As the words of the ritual trailed away, I slid slowly into the welcoming darkness. And out of the darkness, visions came to haunt me.

I walked into the light, for a moment held by the wonder of the sun rising over the mountains of Italy, the amazement of the first sunrise I could remember. Then I heard an agonized scream. I spun toward the church and heard a deep booming voice.

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

Suddenly I was sitting in the library of the Nashville Chantry talking on a cell phone. "You don't understand, Jason, I have to see you!" I needed to be with him so much that I ached.

"No." I froze at his answer; his voice was so cold and relentless. "Things have changed, Christina. I may be disappearing forever."

"No, Jason, you can't!" To finally talk to him again and then lose him forever....

"I'm dead to the world now." He sounded so sad, so lost. Exactly the way I felt without him.

The scene changed again and I was lying in my own bed in Las Vegas, wrapped in Luke's arms. He pulled me closer and kissed me passionately. I put my arms around his neck and ran my fingers through his long silky hair, pulling him down on top of me. He planted little kisses along my jaw and beneath my ear until his lips were pressed against my neck. I felt his tongue run along my skin and gasped when his teeth sunk into my vein even as his hard flesh entered my yielding body.

Tears filled my eyes as he drank, knowing that he was destroying his own free will by drinking my vitae. I didn't want him tied to me in this way, not when I still wasn't sure I could ever love him. But this was the path Luke had chosen for himself; blood bound to me, tied to me forever.

I knew I had only to drink from him to feel what he felt for me. Just one drink of his vitae would complete the blood bond he had over me. I kissed his neck, but Jason's face rose in my mind and I couldn't bring myself to break the skin, not even to drive Jason from my heart.

IN LOVING ARMS

IF YOU DON'T LOVE ME, LIE TO ME

'CAUSE BABY YOU'RE THE ONE THING I BELIEVE

LIE TO ME - BON JOVI

When I drifted out of the darkness, all was quiet. I floated in a sea of blessed numbness for a time, knowing I was being held in the arms of someone who would keep me safe. Then I felt someone else kneel at my side and I was shifted onto his lap. I breathed in slowly, enjoying the scent of the man who now held me. He smelled wonderful, even the underlying smell of the Gangrel clan was there, although it was stronger than I remembered. I tried to smile and opened my eyes to gaze up at Jason.

He looked worried, almost frightened, and there were blood tears streaking his cheeks. In my disorientated condition, his worry and fear didn't touch me. I sighed, happy just to be in his arms again. Somehow it felt as if it had been a long time since he'd held me like this. Idly I wondered why his hands were shaking.

"Jason," I whispered, remembering the visions I had seen while I'd been unconscious, "I had the strangest dream. You were missing and I couldn't find you, or you wouldn't let me find you. Luke helped me look for you. He—" There was something about Luke that danced on the edges of my mind, some memory from the darkness I had floated in.

He gazed down at me, still crying, and tried to smile. "You're awake now, the dream is over."

I tried to sit up and Jason moved to help me, but the agony in my side nearly overwhelmed me, bringing with it a partial recollection of the last few days. My head rolled back and I closed my eyes, trying to take shallow breaths to control the pain. I touched the wound and my hand came away sticky with blood.

"It wasn't a dream, was it?" I asked softly. Slowly I raised my hand and touched the cheek of the man I loved, the vitae from his cheek and my hand mingling on his soft skin. Hunger flared and I had to restrain myself from licking my hand clean. "Where are we?"

"In church." He seemed to get a hold of himself and his shaking gradually stopped.

"In church?" Why would we be in a church? "Where?"

"In Salem," he replied as he cradled me against his chest. The movement hurt my wounded side, and I moaned in pain. Jason didn't seem to notice. He rubbed his smooth cheek against mine, and I felt the coolness of his blood tears on my face.

"Salem?" I knew there was something significant about both of us being there, but I didn't know what it would be. I remembered that I had gone to Salem to break the bond Luke had over me, but I just couldn't figure out why Jason was in Salem.

Then he told me why he was there.

"I read your letter and I came to Salem like you asked," he confessed in a hoarse whisper against my ear. "I couldn't stay away. When I got here you were gone and some guy tried to tell me you were dead. I thought I'd lost you, for good this time. I can't live without you, Christina. I love you, I've always loved you."

I was completely stunned; this was everything I had ever wanted to hear from him and more. What could possibly have happened to make him have a complete change of attitude in only a few days? He'd spent two years not even acknowledging I existed, and now he was professing his undying love? It didn't make sense to me until abruptly I realized the significance of Jason smelling Gangrel again, and the fact that his skin was now smooth when I touched it.

"Something seems different," I said cautiously, pulling back painfully to study his familiar face. He looked the same, but somehow I couldn't reconcile this loving Jason with the indecisive man I'd left behind at the Holding. "This is too weird. Where's Brenda?"

"She's right here," he assured me.

"I'm here Chris," I heard Brenda say. I looked up to see my sister standing near the door, her ghoul at her side.

"Gunless," Jason murmured.

I ignored his comment for the moment. "Did we make it back to the right place?" I asked anxiously.

"Yeah," she replied with a small smile.

I glanced at Jason's concerned face, then looked back at Brenda. "Are you absolutely sure?" I most certainly was not.

She nodded. "Jason and Frasier ran here fast enough."

For the first time I realized that Frasier was in the room with us. He knelt down at my side and gently wiped Jason's tears from my cheek. I covered his hand with mine and smiled up at him, glad that he seemed to be all right.

"Haven't I taught you anything yet?" he asked with a grin. "You're supposed to dodge."

"I can't dodge when my sister is shooting at me," I told him drolly. I really didn't blame Brenda for shooting me; after all, she hadn't exactly done it on purpose.

Brenda made a strangled noise, and Rafe turned her around to face him, cradling her against his chest. I hadn't meant to upset her but I was tired, too tired to tell her that I was sorry. I told myself that I'd apologize to her later, and laid my head on Jason's shoulder as he ran a hand through my hair in a soothing motion. I found myself praying to the God I didn't believe in, hoping for some miracle that would make all of this real.

Jason pressed something small and round into the palm of my left hand. "I believe this is yours," he said softly.

I looked down to see the ring that I had left behind at the holding. Tears filled my eyes and I closed my fingers around the ring, clutching it tightly. "Something's wrong," I insisted, my voice almost pleading. "What's different?"

"About what?"

I looked up at him, at his still beautiful face. "About you."

"I got a hair cut," he said with a shrug.

Although his hair did seem shorter than the last time I had seen him, I laughed at the ridiculousness of his words. I moaned again when the pain hit me and quickly sobered. I resolved not to let him dismiss my concerns because I knew something had changed. "What's different?" I demanded.

Without a word, he took my hand and lifted it to his cheek, pressing the palm against his smooth skin and intently watching my face.

"Brenda," I whispered urgently, suddenly very frightened. "I don't think we hit the right place."

"You hit the right place," Jason assured me, love shining clearly in his hazel eyes.

"Chris," Frasier said from beside me, "everything's fine, you're back now."

I shook my head, unwilling to take them at their word. My heart told me that this was my Jason, but how could he no longer be Nosferatu? From the coolness of his skin and his blood tears, I could plainly see that he was Kindred, but miraculously his skin wasn't rough anymore. A part of me cried

out that I shouldn't care if we were in the right world, that I should take what this Jason was offering me and be grateful for the chance to be loved by him in any reality.

I closed my eyes to try and block the tempting thoughts. "I don't think we're in Kansas yet," I stated clearly as I pulled my hand away from his face.

"No, you're in Salem," Jason told me. He sighed heavily. "When we left Ramadan I was pretty funky looking, but now...."

When his words trailed off I opened my eyes to look at him, but I could barely make out his features through my tears. "Now you're not."

He smiled. "A last gift from God."

I shook my head. "God doesn't exist," I told him sadly. Hesitantly, I reached up to touch his face again, but I let my hand fall before it touched his skin. I didn't know if I could manage touching him again and knowing that this Jason couldn't possibly be the man I loved. "If he did, he wouldn't help us anyway. Aren't we beyond the pale? Damned for all eternity?" I closed my eyes and wished I could heal instantly so that I could get away from this Kindred who was exactly what I'd spent two years hoping for, wishing for, praying for.

"Excuse me," Bruce protested calmly, "but if God didn't exist, then Caine wouldn't exist, therefore we wouldn't exist."

I frowned at him. "Talk about back handed logic...."

Stephen cleared his throat. "In a round about way, he's right," he said firmly. "If God did not exist, why am I here? Why would I have found my uncle after all these years of searching?"

I shrugged. "Coincidence."

He shook his head. "Hardly."

"Why would I be here with you now?" Jason asked softly.

I closed my eyes to try and stop my tears from falling. "Is this a faith lecture?" I asked hoarsely, even as the tears seeped through my closed lids and ran down my face. "'Cause if that's what this is, I can do without." Brenda must have used Nina's box to give me more blood while I'd lain unconscious because I had enough to heal what had reopened on my wound. At least, I hoped that was what had happened, I couldn't taste any blood in my mouth.

I moved to sit up, and Jason supported me carefully. "What happened?" I asked him softly.

"I got better."

I shook my head. "I didn't think there was actually a cure for that," I told him.

"Apparently, there is."

"Are you sure we hit the right place, Brenda?" When she didn't respond, I looked up at where she had her face buried in Rafe's shirt. "Brenda?"

"Oh," Jason said suddenly, "I meant to ask you about this guy in the Sabbat who calls you 'Tina.'"

"What? Robert's the only one who calls me Tina." I was more concerned with Brenda's state of mind. "Brenda, are you okay?"

She lifted her head and wiped at her face. "I'm fine," she told me without turning. "Are you okay?"

"I will be in a few nights," I replied, watching her. I turned to Jason and whispered, "What is she doing? She didn't trip out and loose her guns or something, did she? That would be really stupid."

"Yeah," he said softly then surprised me by then picking me up in a single swift motion.

"Maybe we should get her out of here," Frasier told Jason. "I'll go up and see about getting a vehicle."

"Wait a minute guys," I tried to protest as Jason carried me from the room. "Brenda—"

Jason called my name softly, and when I looked at him he kissed me. Instantly, all thoughts of my sister were swept from my mind. It had been so long since we had kissed, and it had never been like this. I couldn't remember ever feeling the way his kiss made me feel. It was as if I had spent my entire life with a part of me missing, but now I was whole. I felt as if, after years of endless wandering, I'd finally come home.

He pulled away and looked down at me. "You have a ring," he told me softly, leaving the cell and carrying me down the hall. "I have a ring, and we do have Stephen here, he's a priest. We could make it official."

It took me a minute to understand what he was saying, and when I did, I stared at him in amazement. "Oh, my God," I whispered. I would never have expected my Jason to say anything remotely like that. "I don't know what to say after you spring that on me."

He glanced down at my astonished face. "What?"

"It's not exactly what I expected," I admitted softly, still very stunned. "I expected you to go back to California."

"Why on earth would I do that?" He seemed puzzled, as if he truly didn't know.

I stated what I felt was obvious. "Graves."

"What about him?"

Jason, unconcerned about Talon Graves? Okay, now I knew I was in la-la-land. I couldn't handle any more bombshells from this Jason, so I laid my head on his shoulder and closed my eyes. Did it really matter if this was my world? Everything except Jason seemed to be right. And, actually, Jason seemed too right to be true.

He carried me into some kind of exhibition pit where the prince and Sarah were kneeling next to Micky. Everyone else was in formal clothing, and I felt extremely underdressed, although the blood on my clothes didn't bother me, because everyone seemed a bit bloodied. Bruce and Nina stood nearby, looking around at the shattered room. I briefly wondered what had happened here tonight but I had other things to worry about. Had Jason been serious?

"Excuse me, my prince," Jason said respectfully.

Elvira looked up. "Yes, Jason?"

"Christina has been hurt, I'd like to get her out of here," he told her.

She stood and looked me over, quickly but thoroughly. I closed my eyes and laid my head on Jason's shoulder again, too tired to go through the motions of deference to her, even if she was the prince. "Perhaps it would be best if you took her back to the chantry," she agreed.

"My thanks, your majesty." He bowed, graceful even with my weight in his arms. He walked to the side of the pit, lifted me over the rail and set me down carefully. He climbed up easily, and picked me up again, hurrying up a set of stairs and moving quickly toward a door in a corner of the club.

I caught a glimpse of Cormac kneeling near a girl I recognized as Eliza, helping her pick up broken glass from the floor. Stephen stood nearby, talking with two men and a woman, none of whom I recognized. I tried to relax and trust the Kindred who held me, even if I wasn't totally convinced he was the Jason I loved.

As careful as he was trying to be, every step Jason took jarred my injury. I could feel blood leaking from the wound and tried to put pressure on it, but it was very tender. I have to say that I don't really appreciate pain, it hurts too much. I moved my hand away from the wound and made a mental note to ask Frasier what had happened to my cross. When I'd gone into his room, it had been laying on the bedside table. The blood inside of it would be more than enough to get me through this night, and put me well on my way to healing.

When we reached the parking lot beside of what turned out to be a church, Frasier was waiting near a late model luxury car. Somehow he had managed to find one with a driver, and he opened the rear door for Jason, who got in, still holding on to me. Frasier walked around the car and got into the front beside the driver. Within moments, we were off.

I laid back in Jason's arms, wincing a little when the car's movements pulled at my wound.

Jason ran a hand through my hair. "Are you all right?"

"I'll be fine," I told him, studying his handsome face. I searched for his aura and found it easily. That he was Kindred was the first thing I read. That he loved me was the second. He seemed very worried, almost afraid. His aura also told me that he was more at peace than he'd been since the Lord Malcolm had abducted him from the Monastery two years ago.

His blond hair was cut in the same manner I remembered from that ill-fated trip to Italy. It fell across his forehead and without thinking I reached out to brush it back for him. He smiled and took my hand, laying it on his cheek and holding it there. I felt the smoothness of his skin and returned his smile. His hazel eyes were clear and shone with the same emotions I had seen in his aura.

I couldn't help but compare the feel of his body beneath his clothing to what I had felt in Ramadan. There I had felt odd bumps under the fabrics he'd worn, here he almost felt human again. I knew without a doubt that he was no longer Nosferatu, but I couldn't say for sure exactly what clan he was, although from his scent I would have guessed Gangrel.

The car hit a bump, making me sway and pulling again at the wound in my side. I stifled a groan and Jason eased me against his shoulder, protecting me from the worst of the car's movement. He bent to kiss my cheek, and told me softly to rest.

"Is there blood in here?" Jason asked Frasier.

The driver answered. "No."

"Where's my cross?" I asked softly.

"Top drawer, right hand side," Jason replied.

Frasier turned in the seat to look back at us. "Actually, I have it right here."

Jason stiffened and I didn't understand why until I remembered Nina telling me about his new aversion to crosses.

"Can you wait until we get back to the chantry?" Frasier asked after noting Jason's reaction.

Now wasn't the time to find out if the rumor was true. I wanted the cross and the blood inside of it, but I didn't want it that bad. "It can wait," I told him.

When we reached the chantry, Frasier opened the door and Jason stood with me in his arms. He carried me through the house and up to my room, with Frasier walking ahead to open doors.

When he headed for the bed, I protested. "No, I'm bloody, I don't want to get it on the bed."

He changed directions and carried me into the bathroom where he sat me down on the vanity stool. "I'll be waiting outside when you get cleaned up," he told me softly.

I looked down at my bloodstained garments. "I'm going to need some clothes."

"I'll get them." He stood looking down at me for a moment.

"I'll need them before I start cleaning up," I prompted.

"Oh," he replied, then turned and walked out of the bathroom, pulling the door almost closed.

I stood cautiously and made my way closer to door so I could take whatever he brought me without him coming into the room. A few minutes later, his hand came through the opening holding a pair of men's pajama's, his pajamas, the ones I'd kept when I returned his things two years ago. I hesitated for a moment then took them from him.

"Okay," I said softly, "who picked these out?"

"Actually, Frasier picked them out," he told me. "I just agreed. He said you were comfortable in them."

I closed my eyes, hoping Frasier would keep his mouth shut. "I need my cross."

Jason's hand appeared holding the cross by its chain. I took it quickly, remembering his newfound aversion to crosses and wondering how he had managed to hold it even just long enough to give it to me. I almost asked about it but decided not to. We would have time for talk later, right now I really just wanted to be clean again.

"I'll be out in a few minutes," I told them, then closed and locked the door.

THE BEST ADVICE

NEVER HAVE I SEEN YOUR GOD

SO WHY SHOULD I BELIEVE IN FAITH?

TIME BOMB - GODSMACK

I crossed to the sink and turned on the water as hot as I could stand it. Carefully, I peeled off my ruined clothes and washed up as best I could with a washcloth. I left the water running and opened the cross, looking down at it for a moment. Jason had worn this cross for years, had used blood from it innumerable times.

I ran my hand across the beads and swayed as I felt the blood, my own, enter my body. It felt good, making me feel more like myself. I thought of the box Antonio had given Nina and knew that it had probably saved me from being in much worse condition than I was now. Somehow the knowledge that his gift had helped me made me feel closer to my sire. A wave of longing washed over me, and I eased myself back down onto the vanity stool.

I wasn't sure I was ready to face Jason just yet, so I closed my eyes and concentrated on the one person I trusted to help me see the truth. *Antonio, sire, I thought fervently. Please, please be there.*

Christina? came the reply. *What is the matter?*

I am so confused, I cried mentally, and frightened.

Where are you? he said, his concern and caring for me coming across strongly in his words.

That's what I'd like to know, I replied wryly.

Where's Brenda? he asked.

I sent a picture of her as I had last seen her, standing with Rafe in the basement of Guilty Pleasures. I added images of Cormac, Nina and Bruce, thinking that she would probably be with them as well.

Why are you not with them?

Instantly I thought of the wound in my side, but tried to stop him from realizing how badly I'd been injured. I felt Antonio's quick intake of breath and knew he had received the information quite clearly.

What happened? he demanded.

It was an accident, I told him defensively. A gun went off, I got shot. It was an accident and I got hurt, but that's really irrelevant.

Where are you now?

I think I'm in Salem, I replied softly. Wait, I know I'm in Salem I just don't know which Salem.

What do you mean you don't know which Salem? Now he sounded confused. What's going on?

Apparently he didn't know that we had been sent to the other world, which surprised me. *No one called you?*

What happened? he demanded forcefully.

Well, we got caught in a spell, I told him, and sent to some alternate world that seemed a bit like this one, but not really.

Through what means did you find yourself in that situation?

The chantry was attacked and—

By the Sabbat pack? he interrupted.

Yeah, I replied, and Rafe and I were flipped somehow with the Rafe and Christina in the other world.

Well, he reassured me, apparently everything is right again.

Is it? I wondered.

You're talking to me aren't you?

I smiled to myself. *I talked to you there too.*

Like we're talking now?

No, I admitted, but you were there. The really big difference is Jason.

Antonio was silent for so long that I thought I had lost him. I put my head down on my arms, not sure what I should hope for. I wanted this to be my world; I wanted so badly for the Jason here to be my Jason. But I couldn't explain to myself the change of heart he'd apparently had, or the change to his body.

Suddenly I got a mental picture of the first time I'd ever seen Antonio, on the main strip of Las Vegas. He'd been getting out of a limousine with a beautiful woman and he had caught my eye from across the street. He also sent me an image of the two of us standing on a rooftop discussing the bracelet I had on, the one my brother Robert had given me when we were children. I felt a great relief at the images.

Does this help you to know where you are?

Yes it does, I said gratefully, but it doesn't explain the change in Jason. Perhaps someone switched him.

Or perhaps he has finally realized where he's at in his life, he countered. If that is the case, child, is that something you can find yourself content with?

No, I protested, feeling almost hysterical, you don't understand. He's changed. A lot. Like, clan.

Well, strange things have been known to happen, he told me calmly. Perhaps there are forces at work that we cannot fathom.

Antonio, I reminded him, Kindred just don't switch clans.

This is true, he conceded, but as I said there could be extenuating circumstances that will explain everything. Do you still want him?

You're asking if I still want him, but I'm not sure it's him. I didn't know where to start to explain why I wasn't sure it was my Jason. I sent Antonio a series of images I hoped would convey the situation I was in: meeting the Spaniard in the other world, traveling to Salem, seeing Faith and Sarah, watching Akari step out of the way of Brenda's bullet, the ceremony that had brought us home.

It looks as if you've had quite an experience, he commented slowly. It also looks as if your sister is going to be having problems....

It was an accident, I repeated firmly, unwilling to let him think badly of Brenda.

Well, I'm glad you understand that, he said, compassion warm in his voice, but we both know that will not be her reaction.

I gave a mental sigh. I agree.

How are you? I knew he was asking about more than just my wounds.

Still really confused, I admitted.

You don't think that this is Jason?

When I woke up after the ceremony, Jason was there. He was there, but he was... different. As best I could I sent Antonio images and sensations of Jason's skin as a Nosferatu in Ramadan, then those of Jason after I woke in the cell.

In this other world, was Jason Kindred? Antonio asked me.

No, I replied. He was a hunter and I killed him.

So other than these changes what leads you to think that this isn't him?

Fair question, I conceded then proceeded to explain. Jason spent two years forgetting I existed. Two days ago all he wanted was to apologize and be friends. When we got back to the holding, he disappeared as if he wasn't interested in seeing me at all. Now— I sent a picture of Jason kissing me. Now he wants to get married, of all things. Major difference. Why would change his attitude toward me change so drastically?

Up until a week ago, he hadn't seen you in a very long time, my sire reminded me. You can act a part only for so long before reality will set in. Give him time and let him prove his sincerity. That is, if this what you truly want.

If this is real, then I couldn't ask for more. I tried very hard not to think of Luke. I guess I'd always known that the reason I was so drawn to him was not my real emotions, but the blood bond.

And where does O'Connell fit into this whole scheme? Antonio inquired.

He is a part of my life and will be for a long time, I said. If Jason is serious, he will have to understand that. I wasn't going to abandon Frasier in a world he knew little about. Besides, Jason had left me once, what was to stop him from doing so again?

I'm sure that everything will turn out in the end, Antonio assured me. You have good judgement—

Do I? I asked with a wry smile. My judgement hadn't been too good lately.

—even if you don't always use it, he continued, ignoring my protest. And your sister will be there to help you if she allows herself to be around you.

I hadn't thought of that. Do you think she'd take it that far?

You never know. I felt his concern for Brenda and knew that he believed she would indeed take it that far.

That would be stupid, I exclaimed. She's my sister. Because I didn't really remember my family, Brenda and Antonio meant everything to me, even more than my newfound brother did.

Exactly, my sire replied.

We've been apart too long to let something like this force us apart again. It had been my stupidity that had kept us apart before, I wouldn't let her stupidity separate us now.

Then my advice to you is to tell her that gently.

Any suggestions?

I'm sure you can handle it. He was sure. I didn't understand how he could still be so positive in my abilities after all the mistakes I had made in the last few years.

Perhaps I could handle Brenda's guilt complex. As to my other problem.... Any suggestion about Jason?

Let time take its course and see what tomorrow brings, he suggested. From the feel of things, you won't be doing much for a while. Get your strength back. Get your health back. Use that time to contemplate your feelings and observe him. I'm sure he will prove his identity to you.

I wish I could be as certain. Not if he continues to act this way.

Antonio was surprised. You don't want him to act this way to you?

It just seems too much like a dream to be real, I told him. Maybe I was hallucinating.

Give it time and see what happens.

I still don't understand how he could switch clans, I added. I had never heard of such a thing before. I thought there was no cure for being Nosferatu.

Do you know everything there is to know? Antonio asked soothingly.

Christ, is this another faith talk? I challenged softly. Haven't I had enough of this tonight?

That's not what I'm saying, he told me. There could be forces at work that we can't contemplate. If having him in your life means enough to you, then you will let things happen. If he wants to tell you what happened, then he'll tell you. I could feel the uncertainty behind his words. Perhaps in your injured condition, you perceived things incorrectly, Christina.

Okay I can buy that, I agreed. I was a little out of it, especially after he kissed me. I'll just see what happens. And talk to Brenda, soon.

Do you wish my presence there?

His question didn't really surprise me as I had felt his concern for both Brenda and myself throughout our conversation. I wanted to see him, badly, but I didn't want to impose on his life. I didn't answer him.

I can be on the next plane, he offered.

Tears pricked at my eyes. He was such a wonderful father and I was such a bad child.

Is that a yes? This time his amusement came across quite clearly.

I don't want to inconvenience you, I told him. I know you're busy.

You and Brenda are not inconveniences to me, he said firmly.

Michael's here, too, I added, thinking he would like to know that his other adopted child was in town. Jason said something about them finding him.

I take it that the Sabbath has been handled?

I don't think so. I rubbed a hand across my eyes and winced when the movement pulled at my injury. I'm not sure. Things were kind of a blur when we left the club.

Perhaps I should call and have my plane readied, he mused. Let me make a few phone calls and I will get back with you.

Okay. I wasn't about to argue with him, I wanted him to come to Salem. As I felt the connection break, I wished once again that I were actually his child.

I remembered the dream I'd had of my embrace and pushed it aside. I had too much to deal with now, it was something I would deal with later. I made a mental note to talk to Antonio about it when he arrived, but I knew that no matter what I learned of my embrace, Antonio would always be my sire, the father I valued the most.

I sat up and turned off the faucet. Slowly, I stood and made my way to the door, leaning against the wall with one hand while I unlocked and opened it.

WHERE THE HEART IS

I DON'T NEED NOTHING WHEN I'M BY YOUR SIDE

WE GOT SOMETHING THAT WILL NEVER DIE

BORN TO BE MY BABY - BON JOVI

Jason had been sitting on the nearby coffee table, but as soon as I opened the door he stood. I took a step into the room and instantly he was at my side, supporting me and helping me to the couch where I sat down carefully. I watched him as he sat down beside me, and caught the tears welling up in his eyes.

I frowned. "What's wrong?"

He reached over and took my left hand in both of his. "I thought I had lost you."

"I'm fine," I told him, "or I will be. I just need to rest a few days, there's no reason to be upset."

He said nothing, only smiled and looked down at my hand. I didn't know what to think of him. Even after my conversation with Antonio, I had doubts that this was my Jason. The only thing I could do was to watch him, as my sire had suggested, and allow him to prove himself.

After a few minutes of silence, Jason looked up at me. "Still think you're not home?"

"I don't know," I whispered. "There's evidence that says I am, so I guess I am."

"What evidence is leading you to think you're not?" he asked softly.

I shook my head. "What happened after I left the holding exactly?" I asked him. "How did you go from... to...?" Words failed me and I didn't know what to say, but Jason gestured toward his unmarred face. "Yeah."

Jason told me that he had pulled his sire's fangs just before he had killed him. When we'd returned to this world, Jason had taken the fangs into the chapel at the holding and prayed. He had apologized to God for everything that had happen, for forsaking him in his hour of doubt. God had given him a final gift before casting him out forever, Jason explained as he opened his shirt to reveal the place where he'd once been marked for God with a large cross-shaped tattoo. Only now instead of the tattoo, a cross-shaped scar covered the center of his chest.

"It left me with certain irreversible scars and permanently removed me from his sight," Jason explained.

"So obviously you're not Nosferatu anymore."

"No," he agreed, "I'm not."

"What are you?"

"According to Gavin, the Nosferatu Primogen here, God has reverted me to what I was before," Jason said, wonder at the change still strong in his voice, "he increased the blood I had when I was a ghou and made me Gangrel."

I can only say that I was tired and what Jason was saying didn't make much sense to me. "So, you're saying that God took the blood you had in you from Graves then embraced you himself from that blood? Does that mean that Graves is your sire?"

He smiled. "No. Technically, I don't have a sire, I was simply created."

"So you're Gangrel, and you're here, and you don't care about Graves?" I rubbed at my eyes with my free hand, still struggling to take everything in. "I don't see why you can't understand that I'm confused."

"I didn't say that I did not care for Graves," Jason said in a low voice.

I knew it was too good to be true. I took a deep breath to prepare myself. "Okay, what did you say?"

His eyes burned into mine with an emotion I hadn't seen from him in a long time. "I said that at this point in my life – or unlife – I realize there are more important things." He took my hand more firmly in his, and added, "Now when I say that I'll love you forever, I will mean it, forever."

I couldn't believe that this wasn't a dream. I looked down at his hands and felt the blood tears fall down my cheeks. Jason pulled me gently against his chest and held me while I cried. At some point I realized that he was crying too.

His arms around me felt wonderful and the love I had for him washed away my final doubts that he was my Jason. I let him hold me, took comfort in the fact that he was with me and that he felt the same way for me that I did for him.

The only question left was, would it last? I pulled away and looked up at him, unable to stop myself from wondering how long this change of heart would last.

"What's it gonna take?" he asked, brushing his fingertips across the tear tracks on my cheek.

"To what?" I whispered.

"To make you see that I am still me, that this not an illusion," he replied.

I looked away. "Well, it's a little hard to absorb," I told him, "considering that two weeks ago you didn't want to admit I existed and just a few days ago you could barely bring yourself to talk to me. And then it was like 'Oh, ok, I'm sorry I was such an ass, lets go home.'" I looked back at him and shook my head. "And now you've done a complete turn around? I'm confused."

He looked down at my hand still held in his. "Sometimes you don't realize exactly what you can miss until it's gone."

"It was gone for two years," I reminded him wryly. It had been more than enough time for me to realize just how much I missed him.

"It felt like two life times," he whispered.

"I'll agree with that," I breathed. "I still think it's a complete turn around. I mean, how do you know you're not going to decide next week that you don't want to have anything to do with me again?" That was my biggest concern, I believed my heart when it told me this was my Jason, but my Jason had left me before.

"Although my heart has stopped beating," he told me softly, "I've never stopped loving you."

I felt the tears fall down my face but fought against giving in. I had never stopped loving him either, not even when I had turned to Luke in my desperation to get over him. I took a deep breath to steady myself before I spoke again. "So you're saying that no matter what happens you won't change your mind?"

He smiled and it was like seeing the sun again. "Truthfully I never have."

"Fooled me," I murmured.

"I more fooled myself," he corrected, squeezing my hand.

I looked down. "You're planning on staying in Salem?"

"If the prince will allow it and you wish me to be at your side."

As if I wouldn't, I thought with a mental laugh. "You know Brenda really doesn't like Gangrel," I told him.

"I can't do anything else to prove," he began, then slipped off the couch and down to one knee, "that when I say forever I mean forever."

My eyes widened. "You're serious about this whole marriage thing?" I'd thought for sure that it had been something I had misheard.

"Yes," he said firmly. "I think we pretended too long."

I shook my head. "After everything that's happened, after everything over the last two years, you seriously want us to get married?"

His eyes dropped to the ring on my hand. "I understand I don't deserve it, I don't deserve you," he whispered.

I squeezed his hand and he looked up at me. "I'm not talking about the things *you've* done in the last two years."

His gaze didn't waver. "I know what has happened."

"Which brings us to another point," I said slowly. "How many times did you come visit me in my apartment and not tell me?"

"I never visited you in your apartment," he denied.

I raised an eyebrow at him. "Jason, how'd you get the earring?" I reminded him.

"It was outside the apartment on the balcony," he replied with a sheepish look.

"The earring was on the balcony?" I repeated in disbelief. "That's not where I left it. How many times did you come and visit and not tell me, not even let me know you were there? Do you think that it was fair for you to see what was going on in my life when I had no idea what was going on in yours?"

"Being there doesn't have to mean physically being there," he said softly. "I could close my eyes and see you all the time."

At that point I closed my eyes. "What exactly did you see when you visited?" I dreaded hearing his answer, but these were things that needed to be said.

"Tears," he told me sadly. "A reflection of my own."

"Why didn't you tell me when you came to Vegas?" I asked. It would have meant so much to me if he had. When he didn't answer, I asked, "What did you- did you watch me? Did you-" I hated to think that he'd seen me with Luke, but I needed to know if he had.

"No," he assured me. "I only watched long enough to catch a glimpse of what I thought I could never have."

"Well, you can't have it if you don't ask for it," I reminded him, fighting the resentment I felt. I knew Jason had been going through a difficult time, but damn it, so had I. It had been so hard for me living with Luke all that time and still missing Jason.

"Seeing you there, all alone, wondering," Jason told me. "I fought the urge to talk to you. You don't know how many times I wanted to... but I just couldn't."

I looked away, knowing that it was my relationship with Luke that had stopped Jason from coming showing himself to me. At the time, it had seemed like the only way I had to get over Jason. How was I supposed to know it wouldn't work? That I would miss him every moment of every night? That he would haunt my life no matter what I did with Luke? It's not like I had this vast experience with men to fall back on; I didn't even know what love was until I met Jason.

"So it's like the last two years don't matter?" I asked softly.

"What happened the last two years in your life is only a consequence of what I have done," he said.

"What I caused."

"What I allowed to happen."

I shook my head. "What I didn't stop from happening."

"What has happened couldn't have been stopped," he stated bluntly, "and if you would have shown up any earlier, chances are I wouldn't have had a chance to correct it now."

I studied his face for a moment, trying to gauge his sincerity. "Everything happens for a reason?" I asked. "Chance coincidence upon chance coincidence bring us... here?"

"Fate," he said with a smile.

"Fate," I repeated, returning his smile. "So, we're here and Stephen's here and you want to get married."

He lifted my hand to his lips and kissed the rings. "I would like to make the pretence we began so long ago reality," he told me softly.

This was it, this was the moment where I had no more questions, when all doubts were gone and I could no longer stall for time. Jason was here, and he loved me, and he forgave me everything. It was the happiest moment of my life. Of course, I burst into tears.

Jason got up onto the couch beside me and gathered me into his arms I tucked my head into the curve of his neck and felt the coolness of his skin against my lips. There was no reason for me to delay any longer; I could lie to myself and say that I didn't know what to answer, but the truth was that there was only one choice.

"Yes," I whispered against his skin. I put my arms around him as he pulled me closer and I felt his hand run down the length of my hair. Eventually the reality of what had happened sank in and I calmed.

"Now comes the hard part," he whispered against my hair.

"That is?"

"Talking a priest wolf into marrying two vamps," he replied.

I heard the smile in his voice and couldn't help but laugh. "Maybe you could find him later and ask him," I suggested.

The evening's events had taken their toll on me and I was very tired. I stifled a yawn and snuggled closer to Jason. In a smooth graceful movement, he lifted me in his arms and stood.

"Do you want me to bring you anything before you go to sleep?" he asked as he carried me toward the bed.

As he carefully sat me down, I shook my head. "No, but would you sit with me until I fall asleep?"

"Of course," he replied. He sat beside me on the bed and took my hand.

Before I fell asleep, I felt there was one more thing I had to tell him. "Ah, Jason," I began tentatively, "there's something you ought to know about Luke and I."

I saw him wince, though he tried to hide it. "What about it?" he asked softly, his eyes sad. "Whatever happened is in the past, and it was my fault. If I had only believed in myself as much as you did then I wouldn't have tried to hide my heart from you."

I kissed him gently. "Let's forget about that," I told him firmly. "We're together now, and that's all that matters. What I need to tell you really has more to do with me than with you. I have reason to believe that Luke will be trying to find me, if he isn't already looking. Not that I want him to, but he will."

Jason frowned. "He will find you, or he will try to find you? And why did you say he was starting to get distant from you?"

I looked away. "He'll try to find me," I replied. "And yes, he hadn't been around much the month before I left Vegas, but that doesn't mean anything. I'm still pretty sure he's still going to try and find me."

"Why do you think that he is looking for you?" he asked, trying to understand.

"Well, there is a minor detail that I haven't told you," I explained softly. "Or anyone, for that matter."

His arms tightened around me. "A minor detail? What?"

It was my turn to wince, although whether from the pain he'd just inadvertently caused me or in reluctance to tell Jason the truth I couldn't say. "You know that I drank from him a few times," I said, "two."

"Ok, and that means...?" He really looked like he didn't understand, but how could he not?

"Jason, you were a ghoul," I reminded him. "You should know about blood bonds."

He shook his head. "I have never felt a bond to anyone," he denied, "other than to Graves as a friend and father and my love for you."

Could he possibly be unbondable? Some Kindred weren't vulnerable to the blood bond, Brenda certainly wasn't. That could explain why his feelings for Graves hadn't changed when he was embraced. How to explain?

"Well, normally Kindred blood creates a bond between the vampire and the one drinking the blood," I explained. "It's usually very strong. Each drink ties the drinker to the vampire stronger, but three drinks make it impossible to break. It creates something like overwhelming love for the vampire. Understand?"

He watched my face carefully. "I think so."

"Well, I've drank from Luke twice, both times it was absolutely necessary." Now came the part I didn't want to admit. "The thing is, he's drank from me too, on a less critical and more voluntary basis."

"So he's fully bound to you," he said softly.

"Yeah."

"We'll take care of it," he promised me.

I didn't like the look in his eye, but I didn't want to argue about Luke. I let the subject drop.

SISTER

THERE'S A FEW MORE BRUISES
IF THAT'S THE WAY YOU INSIST ON HEADING
MARY JANE - ALANIS MORISSETTE

A soft knock on the door interrupted our conversation. Jason called out and Brenda walked in looking more than a little ashamed of herself. She was still wearing the clothes we'd come back in, and she seemed very depressed.

"Brenda," I said, pleased to see her. I held out my hand and she came toward the bed, her arms crossed over her chest.

"How are you feeling?" she asked timidly.

"Better," I told her, my hand still reaching out for her.

She reached behind her back and pulled out her gun, but I pulled my hand away before she could give it to me.

"I don't want your gun," I said firmly. "I want your hand."

"I'm so sorry," she whispered, setting the gun down beside me on the bed.

I was hoping this wouldn't happen like this, but since she was determined to go here, we needed to be alone. I turned to Jason. "Could you give us a minute, please?" I asked softly.

He kissed my cheek and left us alone.

She wouldn't meet my eyes as I studied the aura that shone around her. I knew she'd be upset about shooting me, but I hadn't thought she'd take it this seriously. I couldn't let this go on.

"Brenda, you're being stupid and you know it," I said bluntly.

She still wouldn't meet my eye. "What are you talking about?"

"Just because there was an accident doesn't mean you should give up your weapons," I told her.

"I should have been there," she whispered.

I didn't understand. "Been where?"

"Where you were," she told me. "It should have been me."

"Well it was impossible for both of us to be there," I said logically.

"You shouldn't have been there," she insisted, tears welling in her eyes.

"But I was," I reminded her gently.

"I'm so sorry," she repeated, struggling not to cry.

"Brenda, it was an accident," I insisted. "It's not like you did it on purpose, did you?"

"No, it was stupid and it won't happen again."

"God, I hope not," I breathed, feeling the pain shooting through my side. "I will never stand near the elevator like that again."

She didn't see the humor. "No, next time it will be me."

"Next time nobody will be there," I declared. "But the point is accident's happen, that's no reason for you to lay down your guns. Don't you think other people have them?"

"I don't have accidents," she said tightly.

"Well you did," I told her, chuckling.

"I don't want any more." She stuck out her chin stubbornly.

Even her stubbornness was charming and I was reminded just how fond I was of my sister. "Well then, don't send me to stand on the other side of the elevator again."

"I just wanted to make sure that you were okay," she said softly, turning for the door.

"Brenda, come here," I demanded.

"I really need to—"

"Brenda, come here and sit on the bed." I'd dominate her if I had to, we needed to work this out.

"I'm not going to sit on the bed," she protested. "I'm covered in blood and I need to go change."

"Come here and sit down," I said impatiently. When she finally moved toward the bed, I picked up her gun so she could sit down.

"Would it make you feel better if I shot you?" I asked softly. "It wouldn't be an accident."

"If it would make you feel better," she whispered, still not looking at me.

"It wouldn't make me feel better because I don't feel badly about this," I told her straight out. "I know that accidents happen. We can't be perfect all the time. If we were, then Jason would never have been embraced." That was my 'accident', wasn't it? If I'd been on the ball, I'd have saved him. I'm sure if I'd felt better, I wouldn't have started crying.

"Don't blame that on yourself," she said urgently.

"Why not?" I asked harshly. "Isn't that my fault?"

"No," she insisted. "You weren't the one who drained him and fed him your vitae, someone else did. You weren't the one that pulled the trigger—"

"I wasn't there to pull the trigger," I reminded her. I hadn't been able to find Jason.

"You did what you could," she told me.

"And so did you," I replied firmly, getting control of myself.

"Oh yeah," she said dryly. "I could miss, and I could shoot you."

"I missed," I reminded her. "I didn't get there in time to save Jason and he was embraced and for two years he couldn't even look at me. Okay, he couldn't show me he looked at me," I corrected, remembering that he had come to Vegas to spy on me.

I reached for Brenda's hand. "If I had died I could see you feeling this way, but I'm not dead. I'm here and I'm going to be okay, just give me a couple of days and then we'll go to the shooting range and teach each other how to shoot better." That thought almost made me laugh, it would be like the blind leading the blind. Maybe Jason and Frasier would help.

"I pray Antonio never learns of my stupidity," she whispered softly.

"I think you had better find other things to pray about," I warned her.

"Great," she murmured, getting up and starting to pace the room.

"I guess I should mention that Antonio is coming here," I added softly.

She turned quickly. "What?"

"Not because of you," I assured her. "He just thought it best to come visit us."

"Oh, wonderful," she drawled. "I get to be chastised in person."

"Actually, I think it was his intention to chastise you if you decided to put your guns away," I warned her. Our sire knew us both well.

"He can't make me not put them down," she said petulantly, turning away so I couldn't see her face.

"He can't?" I asked, amused. "We are talking about Antonio, our sire who knows dominate much better than you or I?"

"He can't dominate me," she insisted.

"Well, if he can't there are others who can," I drawled softly. "Let's see, Elvira—"

"Leave them out of this," she said fiercely, turning back to me. "Elvira doesn't know yet and I don't think she needs to."

Like she wasn't going to notice. "She doesn't need to know if you don't put your guns up."

"Look, this isn't the time to discuss this," she said impatiently.

"It is the time to discuss this," I stated firmly. "If you fall off the horse, you need to get right back on. I think you fell. It was a mistake and they happen. Get back on the horse, Brenda," I pleaded.

"I really have to take a shower," she said evasively.

"Take the gun back," I demanded.

She walked reluctantly toward the bed and reached for it, but I wasn't ready to give it back yet and I held on to it.

"You will wear it and not put it in a drawer," I insisted.

"Oh yeah," she replied too quickly. "Sure."

"Swear to me," I ordered.

"I will do what needs to be done," she replied.

"That's not what I asked," I said irritably. "I guess I'll just have to call down to the study. I believe Elvira is there, or maybe Micky. Maybe he's the person I need to talk to."

She pulled the gun from my hand and slipped it into her pocket. "You should be resting," she told me as she stalked toward the door.

"Swear to me Brenda," I demanded as she reached for the doorknob.

"Okay."

That wasn't good enough. "You have to say it."

"Okay, I'll wear it," she said irritably.

"Loaded."

"Fine."

I rolled my eyes. "Say it."

"Loaded," she bit out tersely.

"Thank you," I said, relieved even though she was pissed at me. She'd get over it. She'd get over it or Antonio would make sure she got over it.

She slammed the door on her way out, and a minute later Jason came back in. I smiled at him and he sat back down on the bed with me. I shifted until my head rested on his lap.

"Better?" he asked.

"Mmm," I replied as my eyes closed. I fell asleep with him running his hands through my hair.

GOING HOME

HE'S EVERYTHING YOU WANT

HE'S EVERYTHING YOU NEED

EVERYTHING YOU WANT - VERTICAL HORIZONS

I sat on the end of the bed, and Luke knelt behind me, brushing the tangles from my hair until I sat completely relaxed before him. Carefully he picked me up, placed me between the sheets, and pulled the covers up to my chin. His fingers ran across my cheek in a soft caress and I grabbed his hand before he could withdraw.

"Thank you, Luke," I whispered. "You have been very kind to me."

"I just did what I had to, babe," he replied.

"You've done so much more than that," I told him. "You have gone above and beyond the call of friendship. Thank you."

He smiled sadly down at me and squeezed my hand. "Just wait till it's your turn," he said. "Some biker chick is going to leave me broken and you'll have to help me pick up the pieces."

I smiled in return, my eyes drifting shut. "I'll be there for you, Luke, I promise."

Suddenly I found myself crouched behind a headstone in a Nashville cemetery, watching with horror as Luke collapsed on the ground. I ran to his side and called for Brenda to bring me one of the bodies. I bit roughly into my wrist and brought it dripping to Luke's mouth.

"Drink, damn it," I hissed at him desperately. "You Gangrel son-of-a-bitch, don't die on me now!"

Luke rolled his head a little, turning away from my arm. I slapped him sharply and pressed my wrist back to his lips, terrified that he would die before I could give him the blood he so desperately needed.

"Drink," I said again, and slowly, he did. I heard a gunshot nearby and turned to see Brenda dragging one of the bodies toward me. Gratefully I grabbed the Brujah's wrist and drank greedily.

A few of Luke's wounds began to close slightly, then stopped. I was briefly reassured when he sucked harder at my wrist, pulling the blood more quickly into himself.

Then I laid him down on the cot on the plane and stripped him to his underwear, sure that if I had been human I would have blushed. I'd seen few naked men in my life, even though a part of my sleeping mind insisted that I knew Luke's body as well as I knew my own. I knelt on the floor beside the cot and tried to rouse him. To my dismay he didn't move.

With shaking hands, I pulled my hair to one side and when I leaned close to Luke's face. My hair fell like a curtain closing us off from the world. I tapped his cheek, trying to bring him around.

"Luke," I said loudly, "wake up, you have to feed." He didn't even blink.

I closed my eyes briefly and allowed my forehead to rest on his. Then a thought occurred to me. I bit gingerly into my tongue, and put my mouth over his. I let my blood trickle through his lips and, I hoped, down his throat. He swallowed once, then again. When he wouldn't swallow a third time, I pulled back a little, surprised to find I was crying.

"You can't die on me," I whispered very softly through my tears. "I need you, Luke," I whispered, bending over him yet again. "You have to help me here. You need blood. Please, wake up and drink."

I fastened my lips to his and let my blood fill his mouth. With agonizing slowness he began to swallow. After a few minutes, a shudder ran through his body, but I continued to feed him. Slowly his arms came around my waist and he pulled me down on top of him.

I withdrew enough to bite my tongue deeply and open the vein deep inside. I put my mouth on his again and his tongue began to move against mine, gradually turning the feeding into a kiss.

Luke's hands began to caress my back and he deepened the kiss still further. He pulled me closer to him until every inch of me was pressed against every inch of him. My head spun; Luke always made me feel so good. My whole body was tingling and my mind drifted in a trance-like state. I felt warm and safe in his arms.

Then he deepened the kiss until it was like wildfire burning through my senses. Luke's lips parted mine and his tongue pushed between them, tasting every crevice of my mouth. One of his hands still held my head while the other ran through my hair and down my back.

He rolled me onto my back on the bed we were suddenly on and within moments, passion flared within me, making me tremble with desire. With unsteady hands, I caressed his bare chest and my body cried out for something that Luke's kiss whispered he could give to me. His teeth scraping against my neck just hard enough to bring blood. I laughed deep in my throat and turned my head to allow him to drink his fill.

Abruptly I realized that Jason stood a few feet away from the bed watching us, pain in his eyes. I stiffened and Luke pulled away to look down at me, surprised at the shock on my face. I glanced at Luke and touched his cheek gently, but Jason's very presence pulled at me.

Luke rolled away as I moved to rise and he watched as I got up and walked to stand before Jason. I turned to look at Luke and saw that he knelt in the center of the bed we used to share.

"Are you off chasing noble causes again, babe?" Luke asked angrily.

I winced at the way he said 'babe'; what used to be an endearment now sounded more like a curse.

"You've always been a fool for noble causes, Christina," he added, his voice hard.

"I'm done with noble causes, Luke," I told him sadly. "I just want my life back."

"Without me," he stated. I felt his anger wash over me, but beneath that I could feel his love. "I was there for you when he took off," he reminded me. "I gave you everything I had to give, but it wasn't enough, was it? You had to have him. Do you really think that he'll stay with you now?" His harsh laugh made me cringe.

I turned to look at Jason, but he was fading away before my eyes. I cried his name and reached out for him, but he was gone. I spun, but Luke was gone as well and I was alone. The light began to fade.

"Jason!" I cried out frantically. "Luke!" How could they have left me like this? Where had they gone? "Frasier?" I called desperately, hoping that somehow he would be there for me. There was no reply.

I started running in the darkness that had overtaken me, my hands groping for some sign that I was not alone. Suddenly the ground beneath me gave way and I was falling, falling forever it seemed, until strong arms caught me and held me tight.

I fought my way out of sleep to find that strong arms were indeed holding me tightly. At first I thought Luke was with me, that somehow I had left Salem and returned to Vegas and the Kindred who held such a bond over me. Then I realized that I was in Brenda's house, and that Jason lay next to me.

Tears of relief filled my eyes. I told myself that it had only been a dream, that Jason and I were together and that nothing could stand between us. I ignored the voice inside of me that told me I had a long way to go before Luke was out of my heart for good.

Frasier came in shortly after sundown to tell us that Brenda was going to Boston to pick up Antonio. She wanted us to move to her house while she was gone and they would join us after Antonio spoke with Elvira.

I healed myself as much as I could and got up to take a shower. I dressed carefully in slacks and a sweater before sitting down on the couch in my room. I laid my head back for a moment to rest, and immediately fell asleep. When I woke, Jason was with me once more.

"Do you feel well enough to make the move?" he asked softly.

I smiled. "I feel a lot better tonight," I told him. "I just have to be careful."

"Frasier has already packed most of your things."

I glanced toward Frasier's room, then asked, "How did the two of you get along when I was gone?"

Jason chuckled. "I can't say I appreciated the shadow, but he did watch out for me."

I breathed a sigh of relief that my instructions had been followed. "I'll have to find some way to reward him," I murmured.

"I thought you had something to do with his protectiveness," Jason said.

For a moment I didn't meet his eye, then I smiled at him. "I wasn't there for him to look after, he needed something to do. And if he kept you safe, I'm glad to know he can follow orders, even when I'm not around."

He laughed softly and kissed me. I put my arms around his neck and pulled him closer to me. After too short a time, he pulled away. "You're supposed to be resting," he reminded me.

"Get O'Connell," I told him with a smile. "Is Brenda in some kind of hurry to get home?"

"I guess so," he replied as he stood. "Sounds like she wants us to be at her house when Antonio is done with Elvira."

Frasier and Jason came back into the room a few minutes later. Jason went into his room giving me an opportunity for me to talk to Frasier alone. He was very concerned about my injury, and I had to assure him I would be all right. He insisted that I show him the wound in my side and with a smile and a shake of my head I did so.

The skin had closed over the injury, but the area was still red and angry looking. He reached out and touched it gently.

"If you were human, you would have died," he breathed in awe.

I grinned. "If I were human, I wouldn't have been in some alternate reality," I told him. "I'd have been.... I don't know where I'd have been, but it wouldn't have been there."

"Next time, duck," he warned with a grin.

I chuckled. "I remembered to duck afterward," I said, pulling down my sweater. "If I hadn't, the next bullet would have hit my head and I really would have died."

I heard a noise from the doorway to Jason's room and turned to see him standing in it. I knew from the expression on his face that he had overheard my words and that they had upset him. I held my hand out to him and he came over to take it rather quickly.

"I'm fine," I told both of them. "In a few days, I'll be back to normal."

"Yeah," Jason agreed. "We just have to keep you away from Brenda."

"That's not funny," I scolded him. "It was an accident."

They helped me to my feet and Jason put his arm around my waist to guide me downstairs and into my Mustang. I relaxed in the passenger's seat while Jason drove and Frasier sat in the back. I'd asked them to put the top down and now the wind in my hair felt good. It reminded me of riding behind Luke on his motorcycle.

I turned on the radio to break my train of thought. When I'd found a good radio station, Jason took my hand. It didn't take very long to drive to the Bathori Mansion, and Jason parked next to the large front entrance.

I waited for Frasier to jump out and open the door for me, but just as I was getting ready to stand, Jason was there. He picked me up in his arms and carried me up the steps where Rafe had the door open and waiting for us. He led the three of us upstairs and into the bedroom Jason and I would share. Brenda had told him there were empty rooms on the third floor, but he didn't want to be away from me any more than I wanted him to be.

They settled me onto the bed but I had to argue with Jason about getting back into pajamas. First of all, I really didn't think I had anything that wasn't more revealing than I cared to wear for visitors, and secondly I didn't want to spend the next three nights under the covers.

When I explained the problem, Frasier went over to the dresser and pulled out a flannel nightgown I'd forgotten I owned. I tried to tell them I'd change into it later, but Jason badgered me until I agreed to put the damn thing on right then. They left me alone long enough to change, then he tucked me under the covers as if I was an invalid.

It wasn't until I was settled to Jason's satisfaction that I actually got a look around the room. Rafe and Frasier had gone to the house earlier in the day to prepare for our arrival, and most of the boxes had been cleared from the room. Many of the picture frames that had been packed away were now on the dresser and the mantle. Actually, the only one I could identify as missing was a frame that had held a photograph of Luke. I didn't ask where it was, I knew I didn't need that reminder of him night in and night out.

Frasier eventually went off and left me alone with Jason, and he sat beside me on the bed holding my hand in companionable silence. I felt tired, but not tired enough to sleep. We talked quietly about a lot of things, getting caught up on each other's lives.

ANTONIO VISITS

TEACH ME HOW TO PRAY

TELL ME WHAT TO SAY

HELP ME - CONCRETE BLONDE

It was almost nine when I heard a light tapping from the door that connected my room with Antonio's. I called for the person to come in, and Brenda opened the door only far enough to peek in. I'm not sure what she expected to find, but when she saw us sitting together talking, she opened the door further.

"I have someone who'd like to see you," she said with a smile.

Antonio stepped into the room and I breathed a sigh of relief. He walked over to the bed and leaned down to kiss my forehead. I took his hand and pressed it to my cheek.

"Sire," I said softly. "It is so good to see you."

"I am pleased to be here, childe," he replied, smiling down at me. He glanced at Jason, his gaze warmer than I remembered from when Jason was human, but something told me he still didn't completely approve of my choice. "And I am happy to see the two of you together."

"It's about time," Brenda drawled, amused.

I smiled wryly. "Sometimes good things take time," I told them, releasing Antonio's hand to take Jason's again.

"Might I have an opportunity to speak with Christina privately?" he asked politely of Jason and Brenda.

"No problem," Jason replied. He bent to kiss my cheek and excused himself.

Antonio kissed Brenda on the forehead before she walked out, and I wondered what had happened to make our sire so demonstrative. He'd never been like that before, but then again, I hadn't seen him in a long time.

After the others had left, Antonio spent several minutes studying me, probably reading my aura. I sat patiently and quietly until he was done.

"Are you happy my childe?" he asked.

I smiled. "Its all a bit sudden, isn't it?"

"Yes," he replied. "Does that bother you?"

I shrugged. "I just would hate to see it take a sudden turn in the other direction."

"I can understand your hesitancy." He fell silent, and I knew that he waited for me to tell him what was on my mind.

"He's done a complete turn around," I explained. "I've told you that he wants to get married and I'm not sure that's a good idea at this point."

"I think there are certain matters that you must take care of before looking into that kind of a situation," Antonio agreed.

I looked at my sire from the corner of my eye. "And I suppose there are no short cuts for that?"

"No," he replied. "Unfortunately, no. This is something that you'll have to deal with. You have made your proverbial bed, now you must get out of it."

I closed my eyes briefly at the pain his words caused. Antonio had always been like this, no holds barred, ever telling the truth, never pampering me. I guess I didn't need pampering, what I needed was a swift kick in the butt for my screw up.

Antonio had been standing near the door with his arms crossed, but now he moved across the room to the fireplace and stood staring down into it. I watched him prop his cane against the hearth and wondered what the last two years had been like for him.

"How have you been sire?" I asked.

"Very well, my child," he replied. "The situation in Los Angeles has been quite an experience, but I believe my work there is done and it is time for me to return to Las Vegas. I miss Idella."

"That is good, I know she'll be happy to see you again." I knew he and Idella had been close, but I wasn't sure how close.

"And I her," he told me, warmth in his voice. "The telephone is not a good substitute for being together."

I had never heard him talk of her so fondly. It was strange for me to realize that they had obviously had some kind of relationship that I hadn't been privy to. I shot him a puzzled glance that he didn't catch, as he was still gazing into the fireplace.

I studied his profile for several long minutes. His hair was pulled back at the nape of his neck and tied with a cord. He had a pensive look on his face, as if he were concerned about something, perhaps mentally weighing things.

"Is there something troubling you, Antonio?" I asked softly. When he didn't reply, I spoke louder. "Antonio?"

He blinked and looked at me. "I'm sorry, my child, I didn't mean to...." His words drifted off as if he were still contemplating something.

"Is there something on your mind?"

"There is a great deal on my mind," he told me. "Worry over my childer for one, but I am glad to see that the two of you are in the same city and can look after each other."

I remembered the wound in my side from Brenda's weapon and chuckled. "When we're not using each other for target practice, yeah," I told him wryly.

"Ah, yes," he said with a small smile before he looked back at the fire.

"Antonio," I began softly, "I wanted to talk to you about a dream I had when I was at the holding. I want to ask you about it, I thought perhaps you could help me identify the person I saw in the dream." I hadn't mentioned the dream to anyone else, not wanting to concern Brenda or Jason with memories of my embrace.

"Of course," he replied, turning his attention back to me. "I will do whatever I can."

I described as best I could remember the bedroom with its fireplace and candles, the bed and the lace coverlet. "There was also a gentleman in this dream," I said thoughtfully. "He was very thin and tall." I told him everything I remembered about the man, and how he'd laughed at my distress. I didn't mention the cup or tell Antonio I thought this was a memory of my embrace.

At my description of the man, Antonio's interest peaked. He leaned his head to the side and cocked an eyebrow.

"Does the description ring any bells with you?" I questioned at his interest. "Do you know this man?"

He put a hand to his chin, clearly thinking. "Is there anything else about this dream that you aren't telling me?"

"Yes," I said reluctantly.

"And that would be?" he encouraged.

"Well," I murmured, "there was a cup in this dream. It was gold and had jewels inlaid around the rim. I was very weak, Antonio, and when I drank from the cup I felt so ill."

Antonio closed eyes as if I had confirmed his thoughts. "Were they sapphires?" he asked. "Were they large and rectangular in shape?"

"Yes, sire," I said with a frown. "I take it you recognize this cup?"

"Yes, I do." He walked back to the mantle and looked down into the fire, obviously struggling for control. "I am aware of dreams that you have had that have been memories coming back to you," he said softly. "Do you believe this to be the sequence of events that led to your embrace?"

I nodded, although he didn't turn to see it. "Everything that I remember about this dream leads me to believe that it is," I told him. "And I have had a few other ones recently that have turned out to be memories."

Antonio gripped the mantle hard, his hands turning white from the strain. Worried, I got out of the bed and quickly walked across the room to his side. When I put a hand on his shoulder, he turned and looked at me in alarm. His concern for me seemed to help him gain control over his emotions. He picked me up and returned me to the bed, tucking me in and sitting down beside me. He leaned across me, bracing himself with one arm as he reached up and smoothed my hair.

"Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, sire," I answered.

After a moment, he asked, "This gentleman, did he have sandy brown hair, thick and straight?"

"Yes."

"Did he have blue eyes?"

My anxiety over Antonio's reaction was overriding my need to know about this man, so I kept my answer short. "It was dark, sire. His eyes were light, but I don't know what color."

He closes his eyes and looked away from me. "*Dios mío*," he murmured to himself. "I had thought his interference in our existence was at an end. I can see that I was wrong."

"Who is he?" I asked softly. "Why does this upset you so much?"

Antonio looked down at me sadly and sighed. I wanted to tell him that it didn't matter, that I didn't want to know if it hurt him this much to talk about it, but he began before I could speak.

"About three years ago a man came into Las Vegas," he told me. "He was basically a Caitiff, although he acted the part of a Ventrue, and was a businessman. He came to our city, yet never presented himself to the prince. I approached him and found that he didn't know of the masquerade and I took him under my wing with the approval of the prince and Idella." At that point he looked at me pointedly. "Do you remember this individual?"

"That would be Michael," I said softly. A part of me wanted to beg Antonio to stop, but I could see that this was a story he needed to tell.

"After the customary period of him getting settled in the city," Antonio continued, "and after he met Brenda, we were designate with the task of finding a member of the Tremere Clan who had stolen ancient texts from the chantry and left town."

I looked away, remembering what Brenda had told me about those texts, that Michael had a copy of them.

"We tracked down this individual, and he was killed," Antonio told me. "His description matches that which you have given me from the man in your dream."

"He was killed?" To have found the person who could answer the questions about my embrace and then to learn that he was dead made my head spin.

"Yes, Michael killed him," Antonio said bluntly. He tucked a lock of hair behind my ear and looked down at me sadly. "So, it appears as if this person is your sire."

"No," I said with a firm shake of my head.

Antonio frowned down at me, obviously puzzled at my vehemence.

"I have a sire," I told him, "and he is here with me. He is the only sire I have ever known or ever will know."

Antonio seems pleased by my response, but I had only told him what I honestly felt inside. It didn't matter who had embraced me, Antonio would always be my sire.

"What was his name?" I asked.

"His name was Piston."

"Piston?" I'd never heard of him. "Do you know anything about this Kindred? Other than the fact that he is dead?"

"I know who his sire was," he replied. "I know that he was embraced in Las Vegas, that he seemed to be the model Tremere Neonate until he stole the documents from the chantry. His sire kept him shut away, as she was very traditional."

I had been given many liberties during my time as a Neonate simply because Antonio had allowed and encouraged me to take them. Many Kindred kept their progeny hidden away until their presentation to the prince.

"How and why would this neonate find me in San Francisco or Sacramento or wherever the hell I was and embrace me?" I didn't understand how someone who wasn't allowed any freedom had traveled to California and picked me, of all people, to embrace.

"I don't know, my childe," Antonio replied sadly.

"This is just too weird," I murmured, "and it makes no sense."

"It is an interesting chain of events I must say," he agreed. "It is something I hadn't anticipated myself."

"Well, as he's dead, I don't suppose there is any way to find out why he did it," I said with a shrug.

"No, there isn't." He brushed my cheek with the backs of his fingers. "I had wanted to wait until you were ready to do the Blood Walk. I guess now that's not needed."

"A bit unnecessary," I agreed. The last time we'd been in Salem together we had argued over the ritual that could trace Kindred ancestry. I regretted the angry words I had spoken, knowing that my sire only wanted the best for me.

Antonio was studying me closely, trying to determine my state of mind over what I had learned. I was upset, of course. It seemed as if I would never know if I had chosen the embraced, or the full reasons behind it. It wasn't that I didn't like being Kindred, I could remember being nothing else. But if I had been forced into this existence, would that change how I felt about myself?

My sire slipped his hand behind my neck and pulled me up a little to kiss my forehead, then he rested his cheek against mine. His actions comforted me, yet brought tears to my eyes. He was such a wonderful and understanding father to me, and I had been so remiss in my duties as his daughter.

Tears filled my eyes. "I've been such a bad childe," I whispered.

"No," he replied. "You haven't. Sometimes there are situations in life where the best thing to do is just be by yourself."

I smiled grimly and pulled away. "Well, if I had been by myself, that might have been something."

"Yes," he agreed, "but again you were learning lessons, and you are now," he paused and gave me a pointed look, "you are now making amends for such things, are you not?"

"Most definitely."

"Then there are lessons learned."

"I suppose," I murmured.

"You don't sound very convincing," he warned.

"It's certainly not something I'll do again," I assured him. "It's just that it will take some time for me to make amends for my behavior, I've been neglectful of more than one person."

He smiled. "You have all the time in the world to make up for things as long as you don't do anything stupid."

I grinned. "Hopefully I've done my quota of stupidity."

"Yes, now we must work on your sister," he told me.

I chuckled a little at that. "At least I got her to pick her gun back up."

"Excuse me?" He seemed surprised.

"Oh, yeah," I told him. "She came to visit me last night with every intention of laying down her weapons. Of course I could not allow that to happen."

"I'm glad that one of you was thinking properly," he commented softly.

"I'm sure that she feels she was justified," I said in her defense, "but accidents do happen, that's all there is to it. That doesn't mean she should lay down her guns. If you fall off the horse you have to get right back on."

"I have spoken with her a little on this subject," he replied.

"Perhaps she could spend a little time with Frasier and get some target practice in," I suggested. "Frasier is quite a shot."

"Really?" Antonio seemed surprised. "I am glad to see that the two of you have chosen well in this area. Although, I would certainly hope that you are not involved with your ghoul in the same way that your sister is."

"No, no," I told him. That would be a bit complicated with Jason here, wouldn't it? "Ah, no."

"Well, I believe I will be staying here for a time," he said, "before I go to clear up a few last minute things in Los Angeles, then return to Vegas."

"There's just one more thing," I began hesitantly.

"What's that my childe?"

I knew that Antonio didn't seem to like Jason all that well, but I needed my sire's opinion on the marriage. "Well, okay. You know Jason asked me to marry him."

"And have you given him an answer?"

"Yeah, but he wants to do it now," I told him.

"And how do you feel?" he asked, his tone carefully neutral.

"I don't know."

He nodded. "I understand that you might feel hesitant about a commitment such as that with him."

I shook my head. "That's not the issue."

"Well, I can see where you would."

"You know, he dumped me before, it's conceivable that he would do so again, but that's not the issue," I told him. "You have to take chances in life to get anywhere. The issue is that until this other is cleared up I'm not sure that I wouldn't be cheating Jason in some way."

"Well, you must go with what your heart tells you," he reminded me. "If you wish to wait and he wants to marry you bad enough, he will respect your wishes."

I studied Antonio's face for a moment. "What's your opinion of the whole marriage thing?" I asked.

"I have to admit that I don't think it's a matter that we should worry about," he said, "given the existence that we have. It's something that I haven't known to happen very often between Kindred, but if it makes the both of you feel more comfortable, then by all means, whatever you wish to do."

"I'm sure given his religious past it would make him feel more comfortable," I replied thoughtfully.

"And I'm sure it would make you feel more secure in your relationship as well," Antonio added.

"Knowing the way that he feels about religion," I said, "if he's going to make this commitment it's going to be forever. I don't imagine a priest would go for a divorce."

"Whatever you decide I will back you up one hundred percent," he told me.

I nodded glad to have his permission if not his blessing. "Is there—" I stopped myself for a moment, before the rest of the question seemed to spill from my lips. "Is there any news from home?"

"If you're referring to the other Gangrel in your life," he drawled, making me wince and look away, "he is still within the city limits. That is all I know."

I was grateful that Antonio didn't chastise me for asking. "Thank you sire."

"Now you must put this situation from your mind and work hard to keep it that way," he said firmly.

"I will do my best," I promised him. "It helps having Jason here, and Frasier. It's good to be among family as well."

"In any case, I must speak with your sister and you need to rest," he sighed. "I need to unpack as well. I will perhaps see you later this evening, or if not, then tomorrow night."

"Of course," I agreed. "Perhaps tomorrow I'll be able to come downstairs for a time." I looked forward to doing more than lying in bed, although anywhere Jason was felt right to me.

"That would be enjoyable." He leaned over and kissed my forehead, which prompted a puzzled look from me. He had shifted his weight to stand when I called his name.

He settled back down and looked at me. "Yes?"

"There's no need to bother the others, with the details of my dream," I said slowly, knowing how much he'd already been upset about the memory of my embrace.

"It is your dream," he told me. "I would not take such liberties as to discuss them with anyone."

"Thank you sire," I replied, greatly relieved. "It is a subject I think is best left forgotten for now."

"As you wish," he agreed as he reached over and tucked my hair behind my ear.

He stood up and walked to the fireplace for his cane. After a last glance over his shoulder, he left me alone.

I laid back against the pillows and closed my eyes. I felt very lucky that Antonio had been the one to find me in Las Vegas. He was a wonderful father to me, and he would always be the father I loved the most, even if I got my memories back tomorrow.

I thought about the dream I'd had at the Holding. It occurred to me that just because Piston had fed me from the cup, it might not have had his blood in it. As a matter of course, Tremere embraced from a cup in that manner, and I hadn't seen the entire room in my dream. It was entirely possible that someone else had been there, had filled the cup out of my sight. For that matter, the dream might not have been of my embrace, it was possible I could have been a ghoul before the embrace.

When Jason reentered the room, I forced thoughts of the dream from my mind. Unfortunately, doing so brought back my insecurities about our wedding.

"I think we should wait a year before we get married," I said softly after he got settled in the bed beside me.

He pulled back and looked down at me in shock. "Why?" he asked softly. "With the life we lead, we might not be around next week, let alone next year. I've already spent too long away from you, I don't want to go risk losing you and not have known what it's like for us to be as one, not again."

He clutched at my hand so hard it hurt, but I didn't complain. The agony in his eyes cut me deeper than the pain in my hand. "I don't want to spend my life, or unlife, without you," he told me. "I did it for two years and it seemed like two hundred. If something ever happened to you or me—"

His voice broke, and it was a minute before he could continue. "I just want to love you the way you should be loved. I want you as my wife forever and always."

I reached up and caressed his cheek. "I'm not saying I don't want to be with you or that I want to spend the next year apart," I assured him. "I need you to stay with me; I couldn't bear to lose you again. I want to spend eternity with you, it's every dream I ever had come true. It's just that I'm afraid—"

I swallowed hard, struggling to continue past my tears. "I don't want anything to stand between us in our marriage. I don't want you to worry that I might be thinking of... anyone else. We belong together, and I want so badly to be one with you. But if we wait a year, I'll have broken the blood bond and you'll know that every part of me is yours."

"I understand what you are saying, I truly do," he said slowly, "and I feel if that is what you want then all I want to do is make you happy." He paused, then looked questioningly at me. "But... aren't you Tremere? Isn't there some kind of chant you can do with a dead chicken or something to break it." He said this last with a smile.

I laughed in surprise. "Dead chicken? Jason, really." Where did he get such ideas? "I've actually done some research in the last two years about breaking blood bonds and from what I understand there are only three ways to do so. The first is to become embraced, which you will have to admit is a little late for me. The second is to kill the domitor." I shot him a warning look before he could say anything. "We are *so* not going there. The last way to break it is simply time."

"I guess I caused the last two years," he admitted. "Now I'll have to pay for it during the next year." He bent his head and kissed me softly.

I pulled him close to me and laid my head on his shoulder. "Please don't take it that way. I don't want to wait to punish you; I would never want that. It's not your fault that things are the way they are between Luke and I." There, I had finally said his name and not even stuttered through it.

"I love you." I told him plainly. "I want what will make you happy, because that's what makes me happy." I thought about that for a moment and frowned. "Unless making you happy means you leaving me, then we'll have to have a 'discussion.'" I shook my head and smiled at him again. "Being with you makes me happy, I don't ever want to lose you again. If you think nothing matters but that we're together, then I agree."

DOUGAL GALLOWAY

HARD AS I HOLD IT IN MY HAND

I CAN'T STOP THIS WIND FROM BLOWING

CHANGE - MELISSA ETHERIDGE

I was sitting on the couch between Frasier and Jason on my first night back to normal when a knock came on the door. Rafe went to answer it, and came back with Cormac. I was pleased to see him, I knew he'd stopped by to check on me a few nights earlier, but I hadn't really expected him to return. When he had been properly greeted, he sat down.

"I heard that you accompanied Nina back to LA," I said.

"Yes," he replied. "I spent several days there clearing things up before coming back here."

"I'm rather surprised you came back," I murmured.

"I had unfinished business to take care of."

I glanced at him but his face was unreadable, as usual. "I hadn't realized you knew anyone here."

"I don't have as much time as I had hoped to visit you as something came up earlier," he told me.

I reined in my curiosity, knowing his personal life was none of my business. "Did you get a chance to read the books you got from Ramadan?" I asked.

"The Spanish book is the same as the Russian book I lent to Jason," he said.

I shifted a glance at Jason. "Which he will be returning, as I have the same volume," I told Cormac.

"That is not necessary as I do have the Spanish version," he assured us. "I gave the Arabic book to Nina to read and she is not quite finished with it yet. The Latin tome I read in Ramadan, except the last half-inch or so of pages. They seem to be stuck together somehow."

"Stuck?" Jason asked. "You mean glued in some way?"

"Something like that."

"You know," I said thoughtfully, "I found a book like that at my father's house. When I touched three words on the page in succession, it opened a secret compartment."

"Really?" he asked, suddenly very interested. "Excuse me for one moment." He rose and went out to his car.

"Excuse me also," Brenda said, rising. "I need to take care of Jorell." The dog had been sniffing around the base of the furniture in the room. She and Rafe exited the room just as Cormac reentered with his bag in his hand.

"Would you mind looking at this?" he asked, pulling out the book he'd spoken of and handing it to me.

"Not at all," I told him. I looked at the page, but my Latin wasn't very good. "I'm really not sure, I don't see anything that could be it. Perhaps you should take a look." I handed him back the book and he studied it for a moment.

He touched the page several times, trying different combinations. Finally we heard a barely audible click and the top page loosened. He sat the book down on a nearby table and took out the three folded pieces of paper inside. When he opened the first one, a shocked look came over his face and he sat down hard on the chair behind him.

"What is it?" I asked, concerned at his reaction.

"This letter is from my sire," he murmured, still reading.

"How?" It didn't make sense. "Why would letters from your sire be hidden in a book you bought in Ramadan? Who are they addressed to?"

"Gomi," he told me. Gomi was the author of the book the letters had been in. "Dougal apparently had knowledge of Ramadan."

I glanced at Jason, a little confused by the sheer coincidence of it all. When Cormac finished the first letter, I asked him if I could read it. He handed me the letter absently, already engrossed in the second correspondence.

The letter had been written before Cormac's embrace and specifically mentioned him. It seemed as if Cormac had been involved in some trouble in Baltimore, and Dougal was concerned for his safety. The second letter was written right after Cormac's embrace and Dougal talked about the incident. He mentioned special properties that his vitae held, properties that made his childer forget their mortal life completely. Only a deep abiding love could return those memories, and the letter said that because Eliza was dead Cormac would probably never regain them.

When Cormac finished the third letter he didn't give it to me to read, but folded it and put it with the others in the book. I didn't press the issue, knowing that the letters were a personal matter for him and none of my business. Then he reopened the book and reread the third letter once, then again. I glanced at Jason, but he didn't seem to understand Cormac's odd behavior any better than I did.

After rereading the letter a fourth time, Cormac held it out to me. I thanked him, but when I tried to take it from his hand, he held on to it for a moment before letting it go. I shot him a puzzled glance, then opened the letter and began to read.

Almost immediately, the second paragraph caught my attention. *As we discussed when I visited, Meerlinda has once more approached me on the subject of the girl in California who shows such promise. Apparently her father is a member of one of the hunter groups I told you about, and she feels it best that the girl forget her mortal life completely.* A girl in California whose father was a hunter? I shot a questioning look at Cormac, but he only gestured for me to read on.

I expressed my concerns about my childer regaining their memories through love, the letter continued, *but she assures me that the only person the girl ever loved enough to be a danger was a brother killed several years ago.* At reading that, I gasped. This sounded way too much like me for it to be anyone else. I glanced again at Cormac, but his face was carefully blank.

"What is it?" Jason asked.

I turned back to the letter without answering. *Because of my experience with Cormac, I told Meerlinda that I wasn't ready to take on the responsibilities of another child. It tears at me to know that I not only ended Cormac's mortal life, but that I completely erased it from his mind. Meerlinda has made arrangements for the girl to be adopted by a clan member who has recently asked about siring a child. I am to travel to the city of Las Vegas next month to perform the deed.*

The remainder of the letter was simple pleasantries, but the body had given me more than enough cause for shock. I looked again to Cormac, but he was keeping his feelings hidden, as always.

"But I thought—" Abruptly I remembered that I hadn't discussed my dream with anyone but Antonio.

"Christina," Jason prodded from beside me, "what is it?"

I looked at him in silence, unable to form the words to explain what I had read. I looked down and reread the letter again. The same words were there, staring back up at me. I had difficulty sinking their reality into my mind. Had my dream been only that, a dream? Of course, if my dream

had been a memory, the letter certainly upheld my thoughts about someone else being in the room with Piston. I stared again at Cormac, but he merely shrugged.

"Perhaps this gives you a reason to spend more time with your brother," he suggested.

"Christina?" I heard Brenda say softly from the doorway to the living room.

I glanced at her for a moment, my hand extending to give Cormac back the letter. I stopped in mid motion and looked back down at the words on the page. Maybe I thought that by reading them again I would find that they had changed, and my world would be unaltered by their shattering news.

"Chris?" Brenda repeated.

I looked up at her at last, shock still written on my features. I shot a confused look at Cormac, but his face told me I would have to find my own way through this maze of new information.

"Brenda, my sister," I said, barely able to keep the tremble out of my voice. "I believe you have met Cormac, my brother," I continued as I finally handed him back the letter.

"What?" she and Jason exclaimed simultaneously. Wordlessly, Cormac handed the letter to Brenda and she took it, sitting down to read.

"It appears that Cormac and I share more than just the clan," I murmured, reaching for Jason's hand.

"Do you mind if I ask what generation you are?" Cormac asked me.

I glanced at him, then at Jason. "You mean now, or before?" I asked.

Cormac frowned. "Is it different now than when you were embraced?"

"Well, yes," I reluctantly admitted with a quick look at Jason. "There was an incident in New York a few years ago when an Assamite tried to kill me." I clutched Jason's hand, remembering the fear that had almost paralyzed me, and the relief I'd felt when he had saved me. "Before that, I was tenth. What generation are you?"

"I am tenth," he replied.

"Oh, my God," Brenda breathed softly as she finished the letter. She looked up at me, stunned. She handed the letter back to Cormac then walked to the sideboard where she picked up a large glass and returned to our group. She handed me the glass. "Give me a unit," she said abruptly. "I think it's time for the Blood Walk."

I took the glass from her with some hesitation. The Blood Walk would reveal for certain who my sire was, would tell me if my dream had been real or just a figment of my sleeping mind. Was I ready for that? Antonio was for all intents and purposes my sire. I never wanted to take that away from him, but something in the note tickled the back of my mind.

"Got a knife?" I asked.

"Got fangs?" Brenda shot back impatiently.

I glanced back up at her and shrugged. We would have to find out some time, and now was as good a time as ever. I dropped the fangs and punctured my wrist, then held it over the glass until it was nearly full. I licked the wound closed, and handed the glass to Brenda.

"Jason, call the Chantry and tell Antonio to get over here," Brenda ordered as she moved toward the doorway.

"Wait," I called suddenly.

Jason settled back down on the couch and Brenda turned to look at me.

"May I see the letter one more time?" I asked Cormac. He handed it back to me and I scanned it quickly until I came to the passage that bothered me. "Meerlinda has made arrangements for the girl

to be adopted by a clan member who has recently asked about siring a child," I read to them. "Do you think Antonio knew about this all along?" I directed the question to Brenda, but she shrugged.

"The only way to find out is to ask," she told me bluntly. "Let's get him here and find out." She nodded at Jason, who rose to go to the phone on the sideboard. Brenda walked out of the room, too impatient to wait for Antonio before beginning the ritual.

I turned to Cormac, not entirely comfortable with the entire turn of events. "I know that you were not intending to be here very long," I said slowly. "Please don't let this delay you."

"I would not think of leaving now," he told me. "I would like to stay until the ritual is complete."

I nodded and returned the note to him. We sat in an awkward silence until we heard Antonio come in the front door. He rushed into the living room and came immediately to my side. "Are you all right, my child?" he asked, the heaviness of his accent showing the measure of his concern.

"Yes, sire," I told him. "I am fine."

"What is the problem, then?" he asked Jason with a frown.

Cormac held out the note to Antonio, but at first he didn't take it.

"What is wrong here?" my sire asked me anxiously.

"Read the note," I told him abruptly, then winced. That was one of the few times I had ever spoken to Antonio with less than complete respect. The first had been when I learned that he'd lied not having a way to find out who embraced me, the second when Jason had been missing.

He shot me a puzzled look and took the note from Cormac. He sat down in a chair across from me and as his eyes moved down the page, a look of astonishment came over his face. When he neared the end of the letter, I could see that he was very shocked and confused. It was obvious that he had no idea of the circumstances surrounding my embrace, if the girl the letter referred to was indeed me. Looking at his aura, I realized that he was on the verge of losing control.

I crossed the room as he closed his eyes and folded the letter. I laid my hand on his shoulder to try to comfort him and saw him do something I had never seen him do before; he took a deep breath.

He stood quickly and crossed to the phone. I stared at him, confused and hurt by his failure to acknowledge me in any way. I sank down on the arm of the chair he'd been sitting in, and watched as he dialed what I soon learned was the chantry in Las Vegas.

"I want Idella and I want her on the phone now," he barked. I heightened my hearing in time to hear Idella identify herself. Antonio took another deep breath before saying, "Did you have anything to do with Christina's embrace?"

"Antonio?" Idella seemed confused, which I could understand with the way he was talking to her. "What in the hell are you talking about? Where are you? Are you all right?"

"I want the truth, Idella," he demanded harshly. "You know that I will know if you are lying. Did you have any knowledge of her embrace?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," she shot back angrily. "I don't know what makes you think you can call me and speak to me this way, but you know that I have no idea what happened to the girl. What the hell is going on?"

"Do you know a Kindred named Dougal Galloway?" he asked tightly.

"No," she replied. "What clan is he? Where is he from?"

"He is Tremere," Antonio told her.

"No. I don't know what to tell you, I don't know him."

I sank down into the chair and leaned forward to put my head in my hands. Antonio really hadn't known about my embrace or who had changed me. It was also good to know that Idella hadn't

known either. The reality of the situation finally hit me. I rose to my feet shakily and walked across the hall into the sitting room.

I walked to the mantle and put my hands on it, resting my forehead on its cool surface. I could hear Brenda's melodious voice from the adjoining study, see the flickering of candlelight from the half open door. I felt Jason's hand on my shoulder and leaned back until I was resting against him.

"Are you all right?" he asked gently.

I brushed the tears from my eyes. "It's just overwhelming, Jason," I whispered. "I always knew that Antonio didn't actually embrace me himself, but I've never had to face it this way."

"Christina?" I heard Antonio ask from the doorway.

I turned to look at him.

"I need a unit of blood for the ritual, my childe," he said softly.

"Ah, actually," I replied, gesturing toward the study doors, "Brenda's got it covered."

"Oh, she has started the ritual already?" He seemed surprised.

"Yeah," I told him.

"Then I'm going to go sit with her." With a reassuring smile in my direction, he went into the study, closing the door behind him.

Jason turned back to me. "Why aren't you happy to know who embraced you?"

I shook my head. "We don't know that yet, Jason."

"Why don't you want to believe this?" He seemed puzzled and I knew I had to explain it to him.

I walked back to the fireplace and stared down at the cold hearth. "I had a dream when we were at the Holding," I told him softly. "I was lying on a bed with a lace coverlet. There were candles everywhere. I felt very weak and when I turned my head I saw a man sitting next to me. He held an ornately carved goblet, and he held it for me to drink from. Right after I did, I felt so sick and so powerful..." Words failed me.

Jason put his hand on his arm and turned me to face him. I stepped closer and put my head on his shoulder as he put his arms around me. From his strength I gained the courage to continue.

"I thought it was my embrace," I told him. "I talked to Antonio about it and he was able to identify the Kindred I saw. I thought that would be the end of it, that I wouldn't have to talk about or think about my embrace ever again."

"But now perhaps you can learn exactly what happened during your embrace," he said softly against my hair.

"Cormac's sire is dead," I told him.

"Your sire."

"Antonio is my sire, Jason," I replied firmly. "I would never accept another, even if Dougal were alive. Antonio found me and took me in and cared for me far more than the Kindred who embraced me, regardless of who that was. I don't ever want to lose my relationship with Antonio, I came too close to that during the last two years. He is closer to me than my own father ever was or could be." Especially if my father was responsible for my mother's death.

I chased those thoughts away and continued. "But Dougal Galloway *is* dead, and if he is the one who embraced me there is no way to know if I agreed to the embrace or if they forced me."

"Is it that important to you to know?" he asked me.

"I don't know," I murmured. "I guess it really doesn't matter, does it? I'm Kindred, and now that you're with me, I'm happy with my life. I've found my brother, and now I have both a brother and a sister tied to me by Kindred blood. Antonio has forgiven me for—" I was not going to mention Luke.

“—not contacting him in two years. I suppose it doesn't matter how I got here, that I'm here now and is all that matters.”

I looked up at him and he kissed me. For long minutes I forgot about Dougal and Cormac, forgot about even Antonio and Brenda. I was in the arms of the man I loved and his touch chased away all of the darkness from my life.

FAMILY

IT'S TAKEN SO LONG TO GET IT RIGHT

COULD IT BE SO WRONG?

MIRACLE - VERTICAL HORIZONS

A little while later we returned to living room to find Cormac sitting quietly once again reading the letters. I sat down feeling uncomfortable; I'd been with him for the time it had taken us to solve the murders in Vegas and to find Lena, but I hadn't been especially nice to him. Not that I'd been rude or anything, it was just strange finding out that this virtual stranger was my brother. I felt more of an emotional tie with Stephen than I did with Cormac.

My confusion must have shown on my face, despite my efforts to the contrary.

"You know," Cormac said, still reading the letters, "you can be made to forget."

I shook my head firmly. "There's been enough forgetting here," I replied softly. "Enough half-truths, enough cover-ups..." I would have continued, but I didn't know what else to say.

We sat in silence waiting for the time to pass. When the three hours it normally took for the Blood Walk had come and gone, I became impatient, shooting glances between my watch and Cormac. When Antonio finally joined us, we all looked at him expectantly. I wasn't sure what I wanted him to say, if I wanted Piston or Dougal to have been the one who had changed me, but I knew the one thing I really wanted to hear would not be forthcoming. In my heart I knew that Antonio had not embraced me, but that didn't stop me from wishing it could somehow be so.

My sire walked over and held his hand out to me. When I took it, he pulled me to my feet and put his hands on my upper arms. He looked down at me and nodded once. I understood.

I returned his nod and looked down, taking a deep breath. Antonio pulled me into his arms and held me while the tears fell. I wasn't sure why I was crying, relief I suppose, that the truth was finally out. My dream had been just that, and Dougal's vitae had wiped my memory and made me Kindred.

"Welcome to the family," I heard Jason say to Cormac.

"I should be welcoming you," he replied, "or rather Christina."

"Well, now we have one more person that we can count on," Jason said. I could tell by the tone of his voice that the events of this evening had shocked him.

Antonio turned and sat me gently down on the couch. I took deep breaths to calm myself and gradually succeeded. My sire simply held me and supported me until I stopped crying. I felt like an idiot for losing control like that.

I gave an embarrassed chuckle and glanced up at Jason. "Why do I feel like we're in a funeral parlor and someone just died?" I looked at Cormac and remembered that Dougal had died. "I'm sorry."

Antonio took out a lace edged handkerchief and wiped at the tears on my face. When he was done, he kissed my forehead. "Are you all right, *mija*?" he asked softly.

I nodded and looked at him, searching for some way to tell him everything I felt. In the end, I settled for something simple, something that I knew would convey my love and respect for him. I laid my hand gently on the side of his face and smiled. "You will always be my sire," I told him softly.

He smiled and kissed my forehead again. "Everything is all right, my childe," he told me.

I smiled. "Just surprising."

"Indeed," he agreed.

"Really surprising," I added. I rose to my feet and walked over to where Jason was standing near Cormac. I put an arm around my fiancé's waist and he pulled me close to his side. "I don't know what to say," I told my new brother.

Cormac looked at his watch and I glanced at the clock to see that it was nearly one o'clock. He turned and put his things back in his bag reluctantly. I could tell that he wanted to stay, but we both knew that he couldn't.

"You're leaving town tonight," I said softly. "Will you be back?"

"Hopefully," he replied. "Shall I send your brother?"

"If you see him, I guess," I said. "Are you planning on going to Paris?"

"Paris is on my way," he told me. "It shouldn't be too difficult."

"Yeah," I murmured. "Yeah, well I went from being an orphan to having a pretty big ready-made family." I could hardly adjust to the change. "I could give you his number," I added, "or call him myself. I guess by extension he's kind of your brother, too. Is this so odd or what?" I asked, glancing at Jason. Then for the first time I noticed my sister's absence. "Where's Brenda?"

"I believe Rafe was taking her to bed," Antonio told us. "The ritual was quite taxing and it took a lot out of her."

"Is she okay?" I asked anxiously.

"I believe she'll be okay with rest," he assured me. "It is a very exacting ritual and it was her first time performing it."

I glanced at Cormac. "I don't want to keep you any more than we've kept you."

"It's quite all right," he told me.

"Yes, young Cormac," Antonio murmured. "You are travelling to Europe this evening, are you not? Elvira says that you are making use of her jet."

"Yes," he confirmed. "I am going to Berlin by way of Paris."

"You know, I could just call Robert," I said. "I have his number. I don't want to put you out or anything, especially if you're in a hurry or have a time frame."

Cormac gave a small smile. "I have two weeks to return Eliza to the city."

"Eliza? There's an Eliza here?" I asked, stunned. Belatedly I remembered seeing her with Cormac as Jason was carrying me out of Guilty Pleasures. "Did you know her? Were you married or anything?"

"Almost," he murmured.

"Kids and stuff?"

"A child," he told me, then looked at Antonio. "By the by, the prince does not know any of this and neither does Brenda."

"Does not know...?" my sire asked.

"How close Eliza and I were," he explained, "or that there was a child. There are arrangements that have been in place for the girl longer than I have been in the city."

"It is your story to tell, young Cormac," Antonio assured him.

"So the kid lives here?" I asked. "She's got to be what, eighteen, nineteen?" I looked up at Jason. "Does this make me an aunt?"

"In a round about way, yes," Cormac answered.

"This Eliza," Antonio asked suddenly, "are you speaking of the girl at St Stephen's? The one with the blood contract?"

"Yes," Cormac replied with a slight frown.

"There is quite a buzz at the chantry lately," he replied. "It seems there is a visitor in town who was in danger of violating the contract."

"That would be me," Cormac confessed.

"Interesting document," he drawled. "Have you viewed it?"

"Not as such," Cormac replied. "Perhaps you could have a copy faxed to me."

"I believe that is a matter you would have to take up with Ford," Antonio told him. "I heard that you were with him earlier that evening, did you not ask then?"

"No," he admitted. "I was a bit preoccupied."

"Perhaps when you return you could view the document."

Cormac looked thoughtful. "Perhaps I should review it before I leave if I am that close to violating it."

"What happens if you violate the contract?" I asked. "What are the terms?"

Antonio cleared his throat. "Well, if anything happens to the child then Ford loses his life," he said bluntly. "The mole is bound by blood contract to join the Society of Leopold. The child is to be protected from any Kindred contact; that would be embracing, ghoul-ing and so on of herself or those around her."

I looked at Cormac. "Would it count if you're her father?"

He gazed back at me sternly. "No one outside of this room and Eliza knows that."

"A trust fund with a quite healthy account has been set up," Antonio continued, "with annual contributions as long as the ghoul performs for the clan." He explained that if Eliza died in the service of the clan, then a large amount of money would be deposited in the account. If she died other than in performance of the contract, a lesser amount would be deposited. She was not to be embraced, and if she was, a blood hunt will ensue to make sure she met final death and an outrageous sum would be deposited in the account for the child. As a final stipulation, no attempt was to be made to investigate Eliza's background. If any of those conditions were violated, Ford agreed to meet final death without argument or battle.

"How strict is the clause on investigating her background?" Cormac asked Antonio.

"I would have to view the contract to see the exact wording," he told me. "Why?"

"Ford was being roughly questioning when he spoke with me."

Antonio seemed surprised. "That's rather odd considering the consequences of violating the contract."

"I agree."

"I haven't really spoken with Ford about the contract," my sire added. "I spoke with Elvira on the subject a few years ago prior to the girl coming into town. I believe she moved here a few months ago, she has been stationed at several locations in the New England area in the last ten years."

Cormac sighed deeply. Did it bother him that she had been a Tremere spy?

"So you were, what, living together? In a house?" I asked, unable to curb my curiosity about my newfound brother. "White picket fence? Two-car garage? Dog?"

"Economy apartment," he said dryly, "flower box in the window, piece-of-shit van."

I chuckled with him at the rare glimpse of Cormac's humor.

"Excuse me," Antonio said to us. "I would like to check on Brenda and make sure she is resting comfortably."

"I must be going," Cormac said as he reluctantly began gathering his things.

"I hope we can spend some time together when you return," I told him. "I believe we have a few things to talk about."

I walked him to the door, noting that he'd reverted to the distant man I'd first met. I wasn't sure how I felt about the connection between us, and I was sure he was as confused as I felt. We stood there for a moment in awkward silence. He made a gesture that could have been anything, then finally nodded at me. I smiled, knowing exactly how he felt.

He walked down the steps and to his car. When he was settled in the driver's seat, he looked over and saw me still standing in the open doorway. He touched two lips to his fingers and I closed my eyes against the affection in the gesture. I gave him a small wave and backed into the house, closing the door and leaning against it feeling exhausted.

EPILOGUE

WE BOTH KNOW WHAT IT FEELS LIKE WHEN YOU LOSE
BUT I'D BET MY LIFE ON A ROLL OF THE DICE FOR YOU
IT THAT'S WHAT IT TAKES - BON JOVI

Jason gathered me into his arms and I took strength from his closeness. In a few weeks we'll return to Austria and the holding where Jason and I will say our vows. Maybe afterwards we can finally visit the islands like Jason promised me so long ago.

Later I'll call Robert and see if he'll come to visit Salem. I hope that seeing him again will trigger memories the way that Eliza seemed to be doing with Cormac. Not that bringing back my memories is the only reason I want to see my brother; I've already remembered the fondness I felt for him, and I know that once he was truly very important in my life.

Perhaps Cormac can come to the holding with Stephen, who will be on hand to perform the wedding, and the christening of Lena's son. Robert should be there too, and I hope it will give all of us a chance to get to know each other better.

I pulled away and saw Frasier standing nearby. I held my hand out to him and he took it with a smile. Jason wasn't exactly thrilled with Frasier, but I'd told him in no uncertain terms that I'm wasn't about to leave O'Connell alone in this world I'd brought him into. In time I believe that my husband and my... assistant will become good friends.

"Shall we go see Brenda?" I suggested. They both nodded and the three of us went upstairs hand in hand. It was a fine beginning to the rest of our lives.