

## *Tina: Finding Myself*

*Wait for me and I'll come back.*

*Wait and I'll be back.*

*Wait through tedious yellow rains.*

*Wait through snow haze.*

*Wait through unbearable summer gaze.*

*Wait when the others wait not.*

*Wait when no letters you'll get.*

*Wait when there will be no hope*

*Wait when all others will give up.*

*Wait for me and I'll come back...*

*Konstantin Simonov (1915-1979)*

Prologue .....	3
Square One.....	4
Gimme Shelter .....	12
Deal with It.....	19
Mixed Signals .....	25
Adjustments.....	28
Immediate Family.....	34
Falling Forward.....	39
Intervention .....	44
What If.....	50
Opposites Distract .....	57
A Little Faith .....	62
Truth Be Told.....	68
Much Ado .....	74
I'll Show You Mine.....	80
We Gather Together .....	85
Fam-i-ly.....	90
Games People Play .....	98
Hitting Bottom.....	105
Bad Behavior.....	111
Strange Bedfellows.....	118
Fools Rush In.....	122
The Ties that Bind .....	125
Gifts .....	131
Separation Anxiety.....	138
Driven to Extremes.....	143
Have No Fear .....	149
Aftershocks .....	154
Not So Fast .....	159
Close To You.....	165
Ready or Not.....	172
Misery Loves Company.....	176
Significant Others .....	180
Fragile .....	184
Wrestling Demons .....	189
Going, Going, Gone .....	194
You Win Some, You Lose Some .....	199
Epilogue .....	202

## *Prologue*

Shadows and shade mix together at dawn  
But by time you catch them simplicity's gone  
David Crosby - Hero

It's not easy rebuilding a life out of little or nothing. I should know, I've had lots of experience at it. You wake up one night in the darkness and find that nothing means anything at all. Shadows gather all around you, pulling you this way and that, and you never quite know which way to turn.

The hardest thing to deal with is not knowing who to trust. Trust seems to be a big issue with me. I tend to mistrust everyone's motives until I've seen proof of their intentions. Of course, when you're all alone and can't remember who you used to trust, some things you have to take on faith.

I still don't know how it happened, how my memory was wiped clean. They tell me an old enemy had a score to settle, but I can't quite bring myself to believe it. I prefer to think he was a friend trying to keep me safe but I know I could be wrong. Either way, my life began in one confusing instant, and the mystery surrounding the end of my old life still remains.

## Square One

There's nothing to me now  
An empty shell unfolded  
Godsmack - Forgive Me

I woke to the feeling of complete emptiness. I had no thought, no purpose. It was as if I hadn't even existed before that moment. I felt the roughness of cold pavement beneath my cheek but I had no idea where I was or how I had gotten there. Rain was falling softly, but while the pavement was wet beneath me, my clothes and hair were dry.

*Jason, I'm sorry.* The thought ran through my mind and was forgotten long before I could wonder what it meant, or who it was about.

Suddenly the craving hit me like an old friend, at once familiar and intense. I hungered for blood the way only a predator would hunger. It seemed as if the thirst had always been a part of me, that I had never known anything different.

The sound of squealing breaks filled the night and I looked up into oncoming headlights that splashed across the street. The truck screeched to a stop and as I heard the driver's door open I realized there was someone standing over me.

I looked up to see a man with light hair and serious brown eyes staring down at me. In his hand he had a very large pistol that looked more like a hand cannon than a gun. His face seemed familiar where nothing else had. Amazingly enough, I was pretty sure I knew his name.

"Petor?" I asked hesitantly, just in case I was wrong.

"Yes, Tina?" he replied, crouching down next to me.

I opened my mouth to ask him something but was distracted when I realized that the fingers of my right hand felt strange. A glance down showed inch long claws on every finger. There was something in my left hand, but I shoved it into the inner pocket of my jacket to protect it from the rain as I sat up.

"What's going on?" I asked Petor.

He put a hand on my shoulder to steady me. "Chaos told me to keep watch over you," he told me, his deep voice carrying a Russian accent that was somehow familiar to me.

He'd said the word as if it was a name, but it was one I didn't recognize. "Who?"

"Chaos," he repeated.

The driver of the truck crouched on my other side, urgency clear in every movement she made. "You need to get up," the woman said firmly, grabbing my arm. Her dark hair was long and wild in the streetlight. "We gotta go." Somehow I knew she was a vampire, but that fact didn't frighten me at all. I was a vampire too.

"Go where?" I asked as she pulled me to my feet.

"Get in the truck," she ordered, ignoring my question and propelling me toward the passenger side of the truck. "You can't be left out here."

Petor and I went to her vehicle and climbed quickly inside. As she put the truck into gear I realized that I was armed, fully armed actually. There was a large handgun stuck down the front of my black leather pants, its grip digging into my stomach. Straps from a figure eight holster ran across

my shoulders, and I could feel the weight of another gun at the small of my back. There was a weight on my ankle that told me I was wearing a smaller gun there, and I could feel a something strapped to my right forearm, most likely a blade of some sort.

Where had I gotten so many weapons? More importantly, what had me so frightened that I felt the need to wear them all at once?

The driver pealed away, cursing under her breath when another truck turned onto the road behind us. "We're being followed," she growled.

"We are?" I looked behind us at the pair of headlights following in our wake. "Where are we going?"

"Back to my place," she said absently, concentrating on the wet poorly lit road.

"Who are you?"

She shot me a quick glance. "Madelynne. What is your name?"

"I-" I looked back at Petor, confused.

"Tina," he prompted.

"I think its Tina," I told Madelynne. Not that I remembered my name, but I'd known Petor's so it made sense that he would know mine.

She glanced at me again, searchingly this time. "Are you okay?"

"I don't know," I whispered. Nothing seemed familiar, not even the clothing I had on, although they were comfortable enough. I had no idea where I was or what had brought me there. I couldn't remember who I was or understand why I was armed for war.

My mind was a whirl of emptiness, a vacant lot bare of memories but not of knowledge. I knew Petor, knew that I trusted him implicitly, but I didn't understand why he was the only thing I knew. What *couldn't* I remember?

I knew that I was a vampire, Kindred. The knowledge was as much a part of me as the thirst for blood. Madelynne was a vampire too, but Petor wasn't. I glanced back at the man to find him watching me as if he thought I knew what was going on. I smiled to reassure him, but inside I was frightened. How could I take care of him if I couldn't remember anything?

Holding up my right hand I studied it in the dim light. The claws seemed a natural extension of my fingers, but I knew they weren't. A moment's concentration made them morph back into normal human fingernails.

Madelynne turned a corner so quickly that I was thrown against Petor as the truck nearly went up on two wheels. A glance behind showed that we hadn't lost our tail.

"Who's following us?" I asked.

She glanced in the rear view mirror. "Mary and Joe."

The names didn't mean anything to me. "Why are they following us?"

Quickly Madelynne explained that when she'd come to town several years ago the Gangrel clan had been consolidated under one leader. Within a few months of her arrival that leader was dead and unfortunately the new leader, Ralph, just happened to be an idiot. A few of their number had joined the Brujah clan but most of them had decided to side with Madelynne, leaving Ralph alone. He

had immediately started embracing couples to build a close-knit faction of the clan that would stand behind him.

"So I messed the clan up a little bit," she admitted wryly.

Somehow I knew there were many clans, but I thought that the Gangrel were the only clan who could grow claws on their fingers. I didn't remember what clan I was, but since I could grow the claws I was probably Gangrel, like Madelynnne.

"Where are we going?" I asked her.

"Jimi's," she told me. "She's Brujah, she owns a bar near here."

I didn't like the idea of walking into anything a Brujah owned, but in this instance I didn't really have a choice. Looking around I realized that we were driving through a working class neighborhood, near but not in the industrial district of town. I thought we might even be headed south.

In an effort to lose our tail, Madelynnne made a fast left turn. In the glare of the headlights I could see a two people standing in the middle of our lane, kissing. Leisurely they turned to look at us, but they didn't even try to move out of the way.

"Watch out!" I cried even as Madelynnne shifted the truck into four-wheel drive and pushed the gas pedal to the floor.

She pulled into the center lane to avoid hitting the pair. The car skidded a little on the wet pavement, but she easily brought it back under control. As we passed the couple Madelynnne reached past me to flip them off.

"I take it you don't like them either," I said hesitantly.

"No, they are with the primogen," she bit out.

After a moment of thought that word meant something to me. Normally one member of each clan sat on the primogen council. That member was usually the clan leader, which made Ralph the Gangrel Primogen. Madelynnne had already said that he disliked her.

"And you're not." I looked behind to see that the truck following us had slowed enough for the couple to jump into the bed before speeding up and coming after us again.

"No," she replied. "There is a group that is loyal to the prince, then there are those that are loyal to the clan, which would be them," she said as she motioned to the truck behind us. "And then there are those of us who are independent of both. We stay out of politics, but we work for the prince when we have to. Mostly we stay to ourselves."

The prince ruled the Kindred of the city, if I the seemingly random thoughts I was having were correct. "And who's the prince?"

"A Ventrue named the Frenchman."

Ventrue rang a bell. They were the businessmen of Kindred society, the suits, although how I could remember that and not know anything about myself was bizarre. I searched the recesses of my mind for something, anything that related to me personally, but other than Petor's name there was nothing.

We were getting closer to the industrial district. Madelynnne tried to keep her speed to about ten miles over the speed limit until our pursuers started catching up. It was a good thing traffic was light and there weren't any stoplights or we surely would have had an accident.

Suddenly I felt a strange sensation at the back of my mind. It was almost as if a communication line was opening, and I could hear a woman's voice speak to me.

*Christina?* she called softly.

Trying not to jump in surprise, I glanced between Petor and Madelynne. "Did you hear that?"

Madelynne shot me a confused look before turning back to the road. "Hear what?"

Then it came again. *Christina?*

In panic I looked at Petor. "Did you hear that?"

He shook his head. "I heard nothing."

*It's Brenda,* she said, patiently waiting for me to acknowledge her.

I realized quickly that the voice was in my head, but I couldn't place it. Dread swept through me as I wondered exactly what happened to vampires who went insane. "I'm going crazy," I murmured, putting a hand to my forehead.

*Chris, where are you?* the voice implored.

With a mental slamming of doors I broke off the connection. I covered my ears as if that would keep the voice away. A part of me thought that if I denied hearing voices in my head I could still call myself sane.

Just as quickly as I'd closed the connection the opening sensation was back, as was the voice.

*Where are you?* the unsettling voice demanded.

Petor gently touched my arm. "Are you okay?"

I congratulated myself for not jumping at his touch and tried to smile at him. "I don't know," I admitted softly. "I'm hearing voices."

*Christina,* the voice called, sounding almost panic-stricken, *it's me, Brenda.*

"There it is again," I muttered darkly before slamming those mental doors closed once more.

Suddenly there was a ringing noise coming from the direction of Petor's chest. He seemed surprised by the sound, and gingerly pulled a cell phone from the inside pocket of his jacket. He studied it for a moment as it cried out to be answered before pushing a button and putting it to his ear.

"Hello?"

I heard a man's voice on the other end of the line, but I couldn't make out his words.

"There is no Christina here," Petor said firmly.

"Who is it?" I asked softly.

"Two of them," he replied into the receiver. "I'm not sure."

I strained to hear the other side of the conversation, but all I could make out was a man's voice.

"Is dark in the truck," Petor told the man. A moment later he took the phone from his ear and covered the mouthpiece. "Where are we?" he asked Madelynne.

"Detroit," she bit out as she turned another corner.

"Detroit," Petor said into the phone.

I wasn't so sure it was a good idea for him to be telling anyone where we were, but it was too late to warn him now. To my surprise I knew where Detroit was, that it was a major American city, and the largest metropolitan area in Michigan.

"Got drunk in Russia, woke up in Detroit," Petor continued. When the man said something else, he added, "What's your name?" He must have been satisfied with the answer, for he gave the caller his name. "Madelynne and Tina," he added slowly. Then he covered the mouthpiece once more and looked at me. "He wants to talk to you."

At the back of my mind I could feel the woman trying to contact me again. Slamming the connection shut before she could fully open it, I closed my eyes. "I don't want to talk to anybody," I growled. Things were happening way too fast, I needed time to figure out what was going on.

"We're almost there," Madelynne said sharply, drawing my attention to the building we were fast approaching. "As soon as I stop, get out quick and get inside."

"I must go," Petor said into the phone. He hung it up and returned it to his pocket.

"We run for it," I told him firmly, pointing to the bar.

He nodded as Madelynne slowed enough to turn into the parking lot. She stopped the truck as close to the door of the bar as she could and when she slammed the gearshift into park, the other truck screeched into the lot behind us.

Petor got out quickly and held the door for me. I sprinted toward the bar as soon as my feet hit the asphalt. To my surprise I got there so quickly that I was barely able to avoid running into the side of the building. I pulled open the door and stepped inside as a wave of music, noise and cigarette smoke washed over me.

It seemed like it took the others forever to follow me inside. I slammed the door behind them and made sure Petor was right next to me as I followed Madelynne to the bar. She held a pistol against her thigh and my instinct told me that I should do the same. The only thing that stopped me was the fact that I wasn't sure if I actually knew how to use the guns I was wearing, and I didn't want to accidentally shoot anyone.

A blonde Kindred woman with dark roots was behind the bar. Her blue eyes took in everything about Madelynne as she approached, even the gun at her side. Once we reached the bar I turned to watch the door. I knew our pursuers wouldn't be long coming in after us and I wanted to be ready for them if they came in looking for trouble.

"Oh, sorry about the gun," Madelynne told her hurriedly. "We're being followed by—"

At that moment the door burst opened and all four Kindred filed through it, claws and fangs bared. The band stopped abruptly and an eerie silence filled the room.

"—them," she finished, the word sounding loud in the suddenly quiet room.

As soon as the intruders saw Jimi the fangs and claws disappeared like magic.

Jimi eyed the group by the door but spoke softly to Madelynne. "What'd you do?"

"Nothing," she replied quietly but firmly. "They're still a bit bitter."

The Brujah watched our pursuers talk among themselves for a moment before looking at Petor and me. "Who're they?" Jimi asked, nodding in our direction.

"This is Tina and Petor," she replied.

"New in town?"

Madelynne shrugged. "I guess."

Jimi seemed to be expecting an answer from me so I glanced at Petor, but he looked as confused as I was. In fact he appeared to be looking at me for guidance, which wasn't the least bit comforting.

"Yeah, I guess," I told her hesitantly. "We're new. Things are a little fuzzy, I'm sure it will come back to me." But deep down I wasn't so sure.

"Can I help you?" Jimi called to the group at the door.

Unfortunately at that moment I felt the mental door I'd slammed earlier forced open. When I couldn't close it I realized that it had a slightly different feel than before.

*Child, a man's voice drawled into my mind. The words held a strong Spanish feel if not actual accent. What is wrong?*

*What is this shit? I demanded. Although I hadn't spoken aloud, I knew he could hear me.*

*Brenda is quite concerned—* he began, but I turned to Petor.

"Do we know a Brenda?" I demanded in an undertone.

He shook his head. "I do not know a Brenda."

Once more I tried to slam the connection shut against the intrusion into my mind, but the man was far stronger than I.

*Child, why do you try to shut me out?* he asked, sounding genuinely confused.

Wondering if I had always had people forcing their way into my mind, I looked angrily into the mirror behind the bar. I could see a young woman staring back at me, her long dark hair falling past her shoulders, her green eyes steady if just a little frightened. Her clothing was a little too revealing for a child to be wearing them.

*I'm not a child,* I sent back indignantly. I refused to let him treat me like one.

*Did I not take you in when you woke in Las Vegas with no memories of your life before?* he asked in a calm voice that was nonetheless a bit hard to understand because of the strength of his accent. *Does that not make you my child?*

At that point I understood that he wasn't calling me a *child*, he was calling me his *childe*, which would mean that he'd embraced me. I didn't understand why he would admit to finding me in the gambling capital of Nevada then turn around and call me his *childe*.

Without answering him, I tried to slam the mental doors closed again and to my relief it worked. Unfortunately, the connection didn't stay closed.

*I'm a little busy,* I shot toward him tersely. *We're in a Brujah bar and there are Gangrel. I don't have time for this!*

*Where are you?* he demanded.

*Why does everyone want to know where I am?* Hell, from the looks of my reflection in the mirror, I was a big girl and had been taking care of myself for some time.

*Where are you?* When he repeated his question there was a tone to the request that almost compelled me to respect him.

In frustration I projected a mental picture of the interior of Jimi's Town. From the vibes he sent my way, he didn't like my reply.

*That does not help me, he shot back irritably. What city are you in?*

*What business is it of yours?*

*I am responsible for you, in case you have forgotten, he chastised me.*

I'd had enough of his rudeness and his demands. Nothing he said made sense to me but now wasn't the time to argue with this mind invader. It was an effort not to scream at him mentally as I sent him a final message. *Last I knew I was responsible for myself.* This time when I slammed the connection closed it stayed that way.

While I had been sparring with the Spaniard, I'd missed the attitude the other Gangrel had been giving Jimi. By the time I looked around again our pursuers were walking out the door and Madelynne was putting her gun away.

"Does that happen often?" I wondered aloud. While I'd been talking about the mindspeak, Madelynne assumed I was talking to her.

"Once in a while," she replied as she pulled a cell phone from her pocket. "I need to call Logan."

I turned to look out over the crowd of people who had, for the most part, resumed their conversations. The bar was busy but not packed, and only a few of the customers were still watching us. I noticed a banner on the stage over the band that read 'Second Hand Hood'.

The circumstances I'd found myself in began to overwhelm me and I wasn't sure how to handle them. I wondered if the mental spooky-boo was a normal occurrence in my life, but memories of any prior experiences I might have had refused to surface in the dark waters that filled my mind.

"Do you need to sit down?" Petor asked kindly, noting my bewilderment.

"Probably," I agreed, trying to smile.

He pulled out one of the barstools and I sat down, leaning against the bar as the band started playing an old Lynyrd Skynyrd song. Short of opening myself up to the mental connections, there was no way for me to learn more about them. Since I wasn't willing to do that at the moment, I tried to think logically about what was going on to and around me.

"Okay, where are we?" I looked at Petor but I was talking more to myself than him. "Why are we in Detroit?" I had no idea if I'd even been to Michigan before.

"Chaos said we would be safe here," he told me simply.

Again he said the word like it was a name. "Who's Chaos?"

He held his hand up roughly six feet off the floor. "He's about this tall, long stringy black hair, black eyes, and a scar right here." As he said the last, he drew an 'X' shape in the center of his forehead with the tip of his finger.

As hard as I tried, I couldn't remember anyone who looked like that. "That doesn't sound familiar," I replied slowly. "Are we running from somebody? Why would we be safe here?"

He smiled wryly. "I was hoping maybe you'd know."

We were in trouble if we had to depend on my memory, considering I didn't have one. "I take it you don't remember either."

"I got drunk and woke up in a castle," he said, shaking his head. "Then we were in the street."

At least he remembered something. "Where did you get drunk at?"

"Smolensk."

That didn't sound local. "Is that in Michigan?"

"No, it is in Russia," he replied in Russian.

At the time it didn't occur to me that I understood his native language perfectly. "You got drunk in Smolensk and woke up in a castle," I repeated slowly. "Where was the castle?"

He shrugged.

"And then we were on the street?" I asked. "So you get drunk in Russia and wake up in Michigan? I'm confused."

"Freakin' magic," he drawled with a faint smile.

Nothing about his explanation made sense to me. "Do you know me?"

"Chaos said to watch over you," he told me again. "To protect you."

"There's that Chaos guy again," I muttered to myself. "Are we running from somebody?"

Whatever had happened, Jimi's probably wasn't the place to talk about it. We needed time to figure out what was going on somewhere that wasn't a Brujah owned bar. Hopefully the mind invaders would leave me alone long enough for me to do that.

"Someone's on the way to lend us a hand," Madelynne assured me as she put her cell phone away. She didn't say whom, and I thought it would probably be rude to ask. I just hoped they would be of more help to us than I was with my memory loss.

We listened to the band while we waited, making some small talk but not much. I really didn't know what to say and I was still bewildered about what Petor and I were doing in Detroit, not to mention wondering how we had gotten there.

## *Gimme Shelter*

If I was safe in my own skin  
Then I wouldn't feel lost and so frightened  
Dido - Honestiy Okay

After ten minutes or so we heard the sound of a vehicle pulling up outside. It was loud enough to be heard over the band, so loud in fact that it sounded to me like they'd left their muffler somewhere in Canada.

"What the hell is that?" I murmured.

Madelynn just smiled and looked expectantly toward the entrance. A moment later two Kindred threw open the door and stalked into the bar. The first man was tall with dark eyes and short dark hair. Following him was a taller man whose dark blonde hair fell to just below his shoulders. Both men looked like they had gotten dressed in a hurry; the second man's shirt was even unbuttoned baring a muscular chest.

As they walked toward us I noticed that the taller man held a worn baseball bat against his leg. From the placement of his hand on the grip I knew he was more than prepared to bring it up and use it against his opponent. There was something striking about him, something familiar that drew my attention, although I knew I'd never seen him before.

"Is that the cavalry?" I asked Madelynn, hoping that the intimidating pair wasn't the enemy.

"Yeah," she grinned. "That's Logan and Scott, his childe."

Which meant that Logan had made Scott a vampire. "Which one's which?"

"Um, Logan's that one," she said, pointing at the dark haired man.

They reached us a moment later, and Logan tenderly put a hand on Madelynn's cheek.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Yeah," she assured him.

They talked quietly while Scott stood there looking around for something to fight. I watched him curiously, wondering what it was about him that appealed to me. I didn't know if it was his physical appearance or the leashed violence of his stance. He caught me looking at him and stared back in surprise when I smiled.

Eventually Logan turned in my direction and raised an eyebrow at Madelynn.

"Petor and Tina," she told him nonchalantly. "I was driving and they were in the middle of the street. I stopped."

He sighed tolerantly as if she picked up strays all the time. "Logan Masters," he said warmly to me, holding out his hand and smiling.

I smiled in return and shook his hand. "Tina."

"Petor Andrews," my companion said as he shook Logan's hand. It was good that one of us had a last name.

"That's Scott Murphy," Logan said, pointing at his childe, who nodded slightly in our direction. He still seemed a little worked up, but he wasn't radiating hostility like he'd been when they walked in.

"I hear you drove Scott's truck here," Madelynn said to Logan. "Did you see anything outside?"

"No, I think they cleared out," he replied.

"Truck okay?"

"Looks like it." Logan relaxed enough to put his arm around Madelynne as Jimi came back to our end of the bar. He talked to the Brujah for a few moments and thanked her for looking out for his girl.

"All right, let's go," Madelynne said when Jimi went back to her customers.

Logan held his hand out to her, and she gave him the keys. "We're not all fitting in the truck," he reminded her gently.

She grinned at me. "I guess I get to go with him."

To my relief, she seemed to expect Petor and me to come along. I smiled and gestured toward Scott. "I guess we go with him."

We left the bar and walked quickly toward the two trucks parked side by side. Scott's vehicle was nothing like Madelynne's, it was much older, rusted, dented and brown.

"Watch your ass," Logan warned Scott as he climbed into the truck with Madelynne.

Scott just nodded and opened the door of his own truck. He tossed the bat on the dash as I climbed in and scooted to the center of the bench seat. Petor got in beside me and closed the door. He winced when the truck roared to life and I had to admit that the sound was a bit overwhelming. Scott put the vehicle into gear and the engine backfired a few times before lurching after Logan and Madelynne.

He drove in silence, obviously a man of few words. After a few moments, I gestured toward the bat on the dashboard.

"Use that often?" I asked, raising my voice to be heard over the engine.

"When I have to," he replied in a deep baritone voice.

"Live here long?"

He shrugged. "Couple of decades."

I wondered how long I'd been a vampire. With no memory I could have been anything from a neonate to an elder. "Is there always so much... tension?"

"Bunch of assholes," he growled.

I assumed he meant the Gangrel who ran with the primogen, but I couldn't be sure. Obviously he wasn't one for idle chatter. I turned back to watch the road as he followed the other truck to Walker's Pub.

When we pulled into the parking lot, a man was standing by the door of the bar waiting for us. He was fairly tall, with a bar towel draped over his shoulder. The light tank top he wore couldn't have been much protection from the damp September night, but he didn't seem to feel the cold. At least it had stopped raining.

Once Logan parked the truck, the man walked around it, studying the vehicle carefully. When he was convinced it wasn't damaged, he walked over to where Logan and Madelynne were waiting for him and just looked at them.

"Aren't you supposed to be bartending, Lucas?" she asked as we joined them.

"It's a slow night," he replied with a smile. "And Carissa's in there."

"Let's get inside," Logan told us.

I glanced around as we walked toward the door, but there didn't seem to be anything hiding in the darkness. Still, I wasn't entirely convinced the night was safe so I hurried in after the others, making sure Petor was right beside me.

There weren't very many people in the bar. Two couples were in the back playing pool, and another couple was near the jukebox that stood halfway down the left wall. I studied them to see if they were familiar, but nothing about them sparked my memory.

To our right was a long bar with a mirrored wall behind it. A woman with unkempt hair was standing behind the bar fiddling with a tap of some sort. She had a hammer in her hand and as we approached it looked like she was beating the hell out of the tap. Another girl was sitting at the bar looking very bored and filing her nails. She'd seen us approach but apparently felt we were beneath her notice.

"Something broken?" Madelynne asked the girl behind the bar.

"No, just making it better," she replied enthusiastically. She slammed the hammer down on the tap and the sound reverberated through the room.

"What are you trying to do to make it better, Carissa?" Madelynne said patiently.

"Less foam."

"I think it's probably okay the way it is," she soothed.

Carissa looked up at Madelynne and to my surprise her eyes were a brilliant green, almost glowing. She obviously wasn't Kindred, but she wasn't human either. A glance at Petor showed that he looked as shocked as I felt.

"Are you sure?" the girl asked, picking up what looked like a multipurpose tool from the scattering of objects on the bar in front of her. "I can get it back together."

"No, but you know what?" Madelynne replied encouragingly. "I'll bet you Scott might like it if you fixed his truck, it's a little loud."

"Again?" Carissa glared at Scott disapprovingly, but the Kindred didn't seem to care.

"Maybe you could do something different to it so it stays," Madelynne added.

"Maybe you should throw it away," the girl who'd been doing her nails suggested.

Scott took offense to that and started bickering good-naturedly with the girl. While everyone else was distracted I took the opportunity to start going through my pockets.

In the right hip pocket of my black leather pants I felt a wad of cash. Unfortunately when I pulled it out they turned out to be Russian rubbles. Petor had said he was from Russia, but I couldn't remember going there. Either I had in fact been there or he'd given me the currency and forgotten.

There was more money in my left hip pocket, but thankfully it was American. I counted it quickly, relieved to see that I had a couple of hundred dollars for Petor and I to live off of until I figured out what was going on.

Once again it occurred to me that I had at least four guns and a knife on my person. For the life of me I didn't understand what I had been doing to need that many weapons or that much money. Unless, of course, I was a drug dealer or some other type of criminal.

Still holding the money in my hand, I glanced up at Petor. "Do you want a drink?"

He seemed relieved I'd asked. "Okay." I handed him a ten, and he turned to Carissa. "Vodka," we said together. As Petor motioned for a tall glass, I wondered how I'd known what he would ask for.

Madelynne looked at the money in his hand. "Don't worry about it," she told him. "I've got it."

He handed the bill back to me and I returned the wad to my pocket.

"I'm going upstairs," Logan announced. He kissed Madelynne on the cheek and disappeared through a doorway at the end of the bar as Carissa sat Petor's drink on the bar in front of him.

In the inner pocket of my leather jacket I found a picture and remembered that it had been in my hand when I had woken on the street. I pulled it out and stared down at it for a long moment, hoping that something about the brooding dark haired man would bring some memory to the front of my mind, but it didn't. Even the handwriting across the bottom was unfamiliar. It read *I'm truly sorry for everything*. *M*, which meant nothing to me.

I showed the photo to Petor. "Do you know this guy?"

He glanced at it between swallows of vodka. "No."

I put it back in the inner pocket and the jacket flared open, inadvertently revealing two of the guns I was carrying. I started checking the rest of my pockets while Madelynne eyed the weapon shoved into the waistband of my pants.



"What are all the guns for?" she asked. "What are you running from?"

"I have absolutely no idea," I said honestly, pulling an extra clip from the left jacket pocket. It looked like it would fit the Desert Eagle Madelynne had been staring at. "I'm having a memory problem."

"Amnesia?"

"I believe so." Not surprisingly, there was another clip in the right pocket, but this one looked like it went into one of the Glocks I somehow knew I was wearing.

"What about Petor?" she prompted. "Doesn't he know anything?"

I put the extra clips away and shrugged. "He says he got drunk in Smolensk, woke up in a castle, and then we were in the street where you picked us up."

She frowned. "Is that in Russia?"

"Yeah, I think he's Russian." Petor was probably Russian, but I knew I was an American. The little flashes of knowledge I was having were at once reassuring and disturbing.

"Do you know him?" she asked.

I glanced at him for a moment, then looked back at her. "He's Petor."

"Is he your ghoul?"

Ghouls drank the blood of a vampire and became their servant. Without hesitation or doubt I knew that Petor had drunk of my blood more than once. "Yes," I said confidently, happy to finally know something for certain about my past. "Yeah, he is. Yes."

Madelynn pointed to my chest. "What's up with all the stuff on your necklaces there?"

I looked down and for the first time realized that there were at least a dozen necklaces hanging around my neck. I picked up one of them and studied the silver dollar sized pendant. On one side it was engraved with 'Спасибо, Владимир', which was Russian for 'Thank you, Vladimir'.

"Petor, do we know a Vladimir?" I asked without looking up.

"I had this guy in my unit in the army," he murmured absently, concentrating on his drink.

I glanced up at him in surprise. "You were in the army," I repeated slowly. "The Russian army." I was beginning to see why I had chosen to ghoul him.

He nodded. "Motor pool."

"Okay, well apparently Vladimir liked me 'cause he said 'thank you'," I muttered, turning the pendant over. The other side was engraved with two triangles, one inside another. At each of the three corners of the outer pyramid there was an eye.

"Do you know what this is?" I asked, showing the symbol to Madelynn.

She leaned in for a closer look. "Nope." A moment later she pointed to another item hanging around my neck. "So is that your wedding ring?"

Sure enough one of the braided gold chains held matching wedding rings, one a woman's set welded together and the other a man's ring. There were no inscriptions inside the rings. I turned to Petor. "Am I married?"

He glanced at his left hand, bare of any jewelry. "Not to me," he drawled.

"It's not on my hand," I told Madelynn with a dismissive shrug.

"There's more than one band on there," she reminded me.

"I have no clue," I admitted ruefully.

She smiled kindly. "You have some problems."

"Seriously, I have to agree with you," I replied. There were at least three crosses hanging dangling on my chest. I picked up the largest, a Celtic style cross covered in knot work. "I must be religious, I guess."

"That's a good guess," she agreed. She eyed Petor for a moment, then asked if he wanted something to eat.

"Sure," he replied easily, taking another drink of his vodka.

"He's probably drinking on an empty stomach," I told her. "You might want to slow down," I suggested to Petor.

He paused with the glass halfway to his mouth, then set it back down on the bar. At least he was a well-behaved ghoul.

"Jolie," Madelynn called to the girl who'd been arguing with Scott. "Go get him something to eat." When the girl gave an exaggerated sigh, she added, "It's not going to hurt you."

Reluctantly the girl got up and went through the same door Logan had disappeared behind several minutes ago.

Carissa straightened at looked at the door. "Here comes the crew," she said as the sound of vehicles pulling up drifted in to us.

"What crew?" I asked Madelynne as I looked at the door.

Four Kindred entered the pub together, and they looked pretty serious until they saw Madelynne by the bar. One of the women was dressed like a socialite out for an afternoon of shopping, and she reached Madelynne first.

"Are you okay?" she asked urgently.

Madelynne smiled. "I take it Logan must have called you."

"Yes, we were supposed to get down here," she replied. "What happened?"

"Calm down, have a seat," Madelynne said soothingly, looking at all of them. When they did she told them what had happened, introducing me to them in the middle of her tale.

The socialite was Emily Stoltz, and when Madelynne was done with her story the woman tried flirting with Lucas, but the mortal didn't really seem interested. Maggie Pylon was the other woman. She looked like a college student, complete with a backpack that had obviously seen many a school day. The other two Kindred were men. Alex Marcus smiled at me and shook my hand when Madelynne introduced us. He didn't seem much older than Maggie, and I wondered if they had gone to college together.

The last Kindred was Howard, but he barely spared me a glance when we were introduced. He'd already begun setting up a table full of electronic gadgetry and was absorbed in hooking everything to his laptop. Some of his equipment seemed familiar to me, like I'd seen someone use the same type of set up before.

"So do you guys have a place to stay?" Madelynne asked me.

If I did, I sure as hell didn't remember. "I doubt it."

"No idea why you're here?"

"No." That wasn't entirely true. "Well, Petor said Chaos told him it would be safe for us here."

She obviously didn't recognize the name any more than I had. "Chaos?"

"I have no idea." I relayed the description Petor had given to me, but she didn't seem to recognize that either.

"We've got a few rooms if you guys want to stay here," she offered.

I smiled, feeling relief sweep through me. I hadn't looked forward to finding someplace we'd be safe during the day. "I would really appreciate that."

"Do you have any other clothes?"

Well, there was the bag Petor was carrying, but I had no idea what was in it. The only way to find out was to look. "Petor, what's in the bag?"

He shrugged and stopped eating the food Jolie had brought him long enough to put it on the barstool next to me. I could see before I opened the bag that it was crammed full and I was relieved to find several changes of clothing right on the top.

I smiled at Madelynne. "Yeah there are clothes."

"Is Petor all set?" she asked, peering into the bag.

"I think there are clothes for him in here too," I told her. I dug through the bag a little, and there were in fact some men's clothing inside. "I have some money, although it looks like half of it's in Russian." I added as I zipped the bag up.

"We can get that changed," she offered. "I'll show you where everything is at upstairs."

"You're being awfully nice," I said gratefully. "Thank you."

She smiled warmly. "No problem." She led the way toward the door Jolie and Logan had disappeared through I followed, making sure that Petor was right behind me. Before leaving the room, she turned to the others. "We're going upstairs, come along if you want."

I wasn't really surprised when the other Kindred began gathering their things, everyone but Emily, anyway. She was standing near Lucas running a hand down his arm.

"Are you coming, Emily?" Madelynne called back to her.

When the woman waived her hand dismissively, Madelynne turned and left the bar. As we walked through the kitchen, Maggie caught up with me.

"She does this," the girl said, gesturing back toward where Emily was flirting with Lucas. Maggie was very friendly, and right away I knew I'd like her. She hooked her arm into mine and chatted amicably while we went upstairs.

## *Deal with It*

And I had a feeling that I belonged  
And I had feeling I could be someone  
Tracy Chapman - Fast Car

We left the pack in the living area on the second floor while Madelynne led Petor and me up another flight of stairs. "Scott's room is here by the stairs," she told me as she walked down a short hallway and opened the second door. "There are two rooms here, you can decide which one you want, they're both open. One's a little bigger than the other one. The bathroom is on the main floor, I'll show you where."

"Did you want us to use one room or both rooms?" I asked hesitantly. I didn't want to intrude any more than I already had; she was doing us a huge favor just by letting us stay here. On the other hand, I wasn't sure I wanted to share a room with Petor.

"You can use one or two," she replied easily. "Whatever you want."

I smiled in relief. "Okay."

She glanced at Petor. "I didn't really get the idea that you guys were together so I figured you'd use separate rooms."

I followed her gaze, but I couldn't read the expression on Petor's face. "I don't think so." Not that I could remember, but he didn't seem my type. Scott, on the other hand, was definitely my type.

She nodded as if reading my mind. "Scott's is the first room, and ours is the big room at the end of the hall. The others are yours, why don't you take a minute to freshen up? I'm gonna go see what Logan is doing." With that she walked toward the door at the end of the hall.

Petor and I went into the first room together, and he put the bag down on the bed. I wanted to take the opportunity to go through the bag and see exactly what was in it, plus I wanted to check my weapons. It would be very bad if we ended up in a gunfight and none our guns were loaded. We checked the handguns first and it turned out I shouldn't have worried. Every gun was clean, fully loaded and ready to fire.

I unzipped the bag and started pulling things out of it. Inside there were two changes of clothing for both of us from the skin out, and an extra pair of shoes. My spare clothes were similar to what I had on, and his were only slightly less... Gangrellish.

Under the clothes we found boxes of ammunition, and we laid them on the bed to check them against our weapons. There was at least one box of shells for nearly every gun we'd been carrying. Other than the extra clip in my pocket, there wasn't any ammo for the Desert Eagle tucked into my pants. Since I didn't have a holster for it, I could only assume that I'd picked it up somewhere along the way. It looked like we'd lost a few guns too; there was a box of .45 shells that wouldn't fit any of the guns we carried, and a couple of banana clips that were designed for a machine gun, probably an AK-74.

At the bottom of the bag was an expensive looking case, the kind some people keep custom made handguns in. The wood was very smooth and the latch was protected by a combination lock. I studied it for a moment trying to remember what the combination was, but I drew a complete blank. Still, I knew it wouldn't hurt to try several random numbers and it turned out I was right. The fourth set I tried actually opened the box.

"Remember seven, five, four," I told Petor as I sat the case on the bed stand and opened the lid.

Inside the case was a Colt 1911 pretty enough to take my breath away, if I had any. Its nickel plating was highly polished and looked like it had cost someone a fortune. As I picked it up, I noticed a design inlaid in the mother of pearl that covered the grip.

I must have stared at the circle, square and triangle for a full minute before I realized I was looking at the symbol of the Tremere Clan, the Kindred warlocks. Set inside the center square was the wolf's head that symbolized the Gangrel Clan. Since the two clans were seldom friendly with each other I didn't understand why they were worked together in that manner, but the affect was rather striking.

The gun fit well in my hand, so well in fact that I thought it might have been made for me. I turned it a little and an inscription on the left side of the barrel caught my eye. 'The Klines 10-9-1999' was handsomely engraved in the metal. I had no idea what it meant, but in any case we now had the gun the box of .45 shells was for. I laid the gun back in the box and closed the lid, spinning the lock.

We replaced our guns where we'd been wearing them and I went to the next item on my mental list. I asked Petor for the phone he'd answered earlier and studied it for a long moment. There seemed to be an address book function, but I couldn't come up with the correct password to get to it. It did have redial, so just for the hell of it I gave it a try.

After two rings a man answered. "Hello?"

"Hello," I replied tentatively.

"Hello," he repeated. The voice wasn't the least bit familiar or friendly. Or Spanish, which was a relief.

I knew I wouldn't find out anything if I didn't start asking questions. "Who is this?"

"Cormac," he said slowly.

I looked at Petor. "Do we know a Cormac?"

"I hope so, Christina," the man said in my ear. "I'm your brother."

There was that name again. "I'm not Christina," I denied hotly. "I'm Tina."

"Then you have the wrong number," he said in a hard voice.

"How can I have the wrong number if—" Before I could finish the sentence, he broke off the connection. "—I hit redial and you hung up before I could tell you that," I murmured resentfully. Shaking my head I handed Petor back the phone and watched him put it away in his jacket pocket. "What a jerk."

"If you don't mind I'll just take my things next door," Petor told me, gathering his clothes and the ammo for his guns. With his arms full, he looked down at the gun case, glanced up at me then looked back at the case.

"You can take it if you want it," I told him with a shrug. I had enough weapons on me that I certainly didn't need one more. "It doesn't mean anything to me."

He grinned and bent to pick it up but in the process he overbalanced his load and I had to reach out and catch a box of shells before they dropped to the ground.

"Take the bag," I suggested with a smile. "You've got more than I do."

With a nod he packed his belongings in the bag and carried it to the smaller room next to mine. After I put my clothes in the dresser and the ammo in the drawer bed site table, I removed my jacket

and laid it on the bed. It took just a minute to unbuckle the knife sheath strapped to my forearm and lay it next to the jacket.

I thought about taking some of my other guns off, but strangely I was reluctant to do so. There had been trouble earlier, and it was quite possible that the other Detroit Gangrel would make some sort of play tonight. Plus, the others had been armed so I knew my weapons wouldn't be that much out of place. When Petor came back to my room we went downstairs to rejoin the pack.

I hesitated for a moment at the bottom of the stairs to look around the room. Everyone was involved in what looked like his or her normal nightly activities. Madelynne, Logan, Scott and Alex were talking in the sitting area. Howard was already wrapped up in his electronic equipment. The other two women were sitting at a table talking. A wave of shyness hit me. The pack was an established unit and I wasn't sure how or where Petor and I could fit in. We were newcomers, strangers among them.

Then I remembered how nice everyone had been to us already, how accepting. Madelynne hadn't hesitated to stop and pick us up, in fact then she had made every effort since then to make both of us feel comfortable. There was no reason for us not to fit in.

Petor followed me over to the table where Howard had set up his electronic equipment. I recognized some of the things on the table, but others were unfamiliar and looked custom made.

"Hi," I said shyly.

"Hi," he replied without looking up. "You don't remember your last name?"

I realized that Madelynne must have filled them all in on my amnesia. "Nope."

"Okay."

Given his obvious affinity to computers, I thought she might have asked him to check into who I was so I volunteered what I knew. "I've got some guy named Cormac says he's my brother," I offered. "I didn't catch his last name."

"Well, starting tomorrow you're Tina Andrews," he replied, still watching the screen. "Do you have any ID on you?"

If I did, I would have known my last name. "No," I said aloud. "Neither does Petor. There was a gun case in the bag with a Colt 1911 inside, nickel plated, expensive, custom made." I wondered briefly if it had been Petor's or mine. "It had the Gangrel and Tremere clan symbols on the hilt, one superimposed on the other. And it said 'the Klines' and '10-9-1999' on the barrel. Does that help?"

"I can try," he replied, typing something into the computer.

"Wireless Internet?" I asked, eyeing the small satellite transmitter and the cellular phone module attached to the computer.

He smiled at the screen of his laptop. "Technology Bill Gates has never had in his wildest, wettest dreams," he purred.

That made me laugh. It was funny how some guys found themselves more wrapped up in technology than real life. I asked a few questions about what he was using. He told me he'd bought some of it and made the rest, which from the looks of things I could believe. Through the entire conversation he never took his eyes from the computer or his hands from the keyboard.

"Are you trying to find out who I am?" I asked after a few minutes.

"I will be."

From what I could tell by what was flashing on the screen, if the information was out there he'd be able to find it. "Okay."

I could see he was busy, so I excused myself and walked over to join Madelynne on the couch. The men she'd been talking to had gone downstairs and we had a moment alone. Well, almost alone, Petor stuck to my side like a shadow. It was just as well actually; it saved me from worrying about where he was and whether or not he was safe.

"Are you all settled?" Madelynne asked.

"Yeah I think so." I was grateful that she had helped us. "We have a couple of changes of clothing and enough ammo for a war."

She laughed as if being armed to the teeth was the most natural thing in the world. "Well, it's good to have," she assured me.

"I'm not quite sure about that," I admitted hesitantly. "I'm still trying to figure out why I have so many guns."

She shrugged. "Better safe than sorry?"

"Either that or I'm a drug dealer," I said with a wry smile. "That's all I can figure."

"Maybe Howard can help you," she told me.

"Yeah, he said he was going to look." I glanced at Howard and thought about the phone call I'd made earlier. "You know, when we were upstairs I used Petor's phone," I told Madelynne. "I hit redial and I got this really weird guy. He hung up on me. He said his name was Cormac and that I was his sister Christina." I was going to mention the woman Brenda and the voices in my head, but I didn't want Madelynne to think I was crazy.

"Do you think maybe that's your real name?" she asked quickly. "Or your full name? You know Tina is short for Christina."

I hadn't thought about that but she was right. "Could be," I admitted, "but it doesn't sound right."

"Where did the call go to?"

"I don't know," I admitted. I took the phone back from Petor and hit the buttons necessary to pull up the number.

Madelynne looked at the display. "Howard, where's this number going?"

When she read off the number to him, Howard typed something in and hovered intently over his screen. After several minutes, he said, "It bounced through several ghost routing agents, but it's a Massachusetts number."

I looked at Petor. "Do you know anything about Massachusetts?"

"Salem witch hunts?" he murmured slowly. "Boston Tea Party?"

I'd hoped he would know more than that, his memory was much more intact than mine was. "That's all I'm coming up with," I admitted.

"Do you think maybe you have family there?" Madelynne asked. "I mean, he said he's your brother."

"Yeah, but I didn't recognize the voice." Not that I was recognizing much of anything tonight. "And he was..." I didn't quite know how to explain it. He hadn't been nasty exactly, just short, impatient.

"He was rude?" she suggested.

I smiled. "Well, he did seem a little blunt."

"If he said you were his sister, maybe he recognized your voice," she said thoughtfully.

"That's a good point," I agreed, "although I told him I wasn't his sister and he told me I had the wrong number."

"Well maybe you should try the number again," she suggested. "Ask him not to hang up so quickly on you. Let him know that the last time you called you hit redial. Maybe he can shed some light on your life."

"Could be, I'll try it." It sounded like a good idea in theory. In practice, he would probably just hang up on me again.

"If you want to find out anything," Madelynne added softly. "You are welcome to stay with us and join our group."

Her easy acceptance of us took me by surprise. "I appreciate that," I said honestly.

"It's not quite such a bad place to stay," she said with a smile. "Once in a while we have our... problems."

I grinned. "You know I think I'm armed for that. I just hope I know how to use this stuff." It seemed like I could, but I really didn't remember.

"If not, Scott can teach you," she assured me as the guys came back upstairs.

While she went over to talk to Logan's child, I looked down at the phone in my hand. I knew I should try calling Cormac again, but I dreaded doing it. He had been bad mannered, and I wasn't sure I could take his attitude again so quickly, especially after the rudeness of the mind invaders earlier. Luckily, when I tried the number again it was busy. I put my possible relation out of my mind and set out to learn more about the pack I found myself running with.

Although I didn't ask, I was pretty sure they were all Gangrel. I didn't honestly know but I thought I probably was too. I couldn't remember if Gangrel could move as fast as I had on the way into Jimi's Town, but it seemed to me that if it wasn't a natural ability, any of them could learn it. Vampires are supposed to be fast, right?

Scott seemed a bit gruff at first, almost imposing. It didn't take me long to realize that as gruff as he seemed, the pack regarded him as their security blanket. They all seemed used to his silence but it was almost as if they knew he was the biggest wolf in the pack and that he'd defend them all with his life.

If Scott was the biggest wolf, Madelynne was the alpha of the pack. She took care of everyone and they all listened to her and Logan. The two of them were clearly a couple and quite affectionate with each other, but they also took the time to make both Petor and me feel included in the pack.

Maggie was very down to earth, and willing to volunteer information about everyone. She seemed to like touching everyone, and soon she was including me in her casual contact. I thought Alex must have been around the same age, but with Kindred it's hard to tell. Alex acted like a frat boy, and for some reason I thought he might go through eternity acting the same way.

Of course Emily seemed to like men best. She was very flirtatious with all of them except Logan. She eyed Petor a couple of times, but when she saw how close he stayed to my side, she kept her distance.

Howard seemed to appreciate the fact that I knew something about his equipment. While I had nowhere near his expertise, I knew enough to ask the right questions and I think he liked that. It was kind of hard to tell, Howard was much more interested in his computer screen than anything else.

I felt comfortable with these Kindred, at home with them even. The ease that I fit into their group told me that I had been around Gangrel before and erased all doubts I might have had about being one of their clan. Even not knowing who I was or where I belonged, I felt like I'd found a home.

## Mixed Signals

I need to get my bearings  
I'm lost and the shadows keep on changing  
Poe - Haunted

After an hour or so of talking with the others, Petor and I went back up to my room where I could try calling Cormac again in private. I turned the phone back on and hit redial.

"Don't hang up," I said quickly when he answered.

"Where are you?" he demanded urgently.

At least this time he was willing to talk to me, but he was still rather rude. "Um, Detroit? I hit redial on this phone—"

"What are you doing in Detroit?" he asked, his voice harsh.

"That's a really good question, I'm not real sure," I admitted ruefully. I wished I knew what I was doing in Detroit, but honestly I had no fucking clue.

"Everyone's flipping out back here." There was concern in his voice, and a bit of anger as well.

"Back where?"

"In Salem." He said it slowly, like I should have known without asking.

What was it that Petor had said about Salem? "Witch trials?"

"Huh?"

"Salem witch trials," I repeated, "or Salem, Washington?" I just wanted to make sure we were talking about the same side of the continent.

"Salem, Massachusetts," he said slowly.

I wasn't sure what else to say, so I thought I'd start from the beginning. Maybe this guy could shed some light on what had happened to Petor and me. "Um, Petor had this phone—"

"Who's Petor?" he interrupted.

"Um, my uh..." Since I didn't know whom I was talking to I didn't want to say ghoul. I knew instinctively that it was not a good idea to use that word with someone who wasn't Kindred. "My associate. He had this phone so I hit redial and got you, but you hung up on me before I could explain. Anyway I'm trying to figure out what's going on."

"You're missing," he said patiently, almost as if I were a child.

"I am?" That rather surprised me, but then again I didn't know where I was supposed to be in the first place. "I thought I was in Detroit. Although there might have been a little detour through Russia," I mumbled to myself, feeling as ignorant as a child in that moment.

He heard me. "Russia?"

"I don't know," I told him honestly. "Petor's Russian, and I have Russian money in my pocket."

"Who's Petor?" he demanded again.

"My associate, Petor," I repeated. If Cormac really knew me, why didn't he know my ghoul? "So who are you again?"

He sighed heavily. "Why are you in Detroit?"

"I told you, I don't know," I said, a little impatiently. "I woke up lying in the street, and I don't remember anything."

"Again?" For some reason he didn't sound surprised.

"A-again?" That threw me for a moment. "Does this happen a lot?"

"At least twice," he murmured.

"Okay." Of course it wasn't okay, I had no idea who I was or what I'd been running from, but it sounded like I'd been lucky to get away. "Do I know you?"

"We have the same sire," he told me.

If Cormac was telling the truth, our sire had turned both of us into vampires. I wondered if the Spaniard claimed to have adopted him as well. "So you're Gangrel?"

After a moment of stunned silence, he murmured, "No..."

Obviously there was some kind of misunderstanding going on here. "Then how can we have the same sire?"

"Because Dougal embraced both of us." He seemed to be acting a little nicer since I'd told him I couldn't remember anything.

"Who's Dougal?"

"Dougal Galloway," he said patiently.

The name meant nothing to me, absolutely nothing. "So if you're not Gangrel, what are you?"

"Tremere."

Tremere. Where had I seen reference to that clan before? "The gun!" I cried, happy to have something fall into place at last.

"What makes you think you're Gangrel?" he asked softly.

"Protean. And my clothes," I added wryly, looking down at the black leather I was wearing. "It's wicked obvious."

Suddenly his voice was serious as a heart attack and hard as stone. "Is Luke there with you?"

It really sounded as if he didn't like this Luke, whoever he was. "Um, there's a Lucas here, but I don't think a Luke," I told him hesitantly. At least I hadn't heard anyone call him Luke. "I don't think so. He's an um, associate of one of the other people here. I think. I'm pretty sure." Hell, honestly I didn't know if I was coming or going.

Cormac surprised me by growling in my ear.

I frowned. "You're not supposed to growl on the phone, it's impolite."

The growling subsided. "Elvira's pissed," he announced.

"Who?"

"The prince," he prompted.

I had no idea who he was talking about. "The prince is a woman?"

"The one here is, yes."

"In Salem, you said," I murmured. I tried to keep these facts straight in my head so that I could tell Madelynn later. Maybe Howard could check to see if this Cormac really was related to me.

"Yes."

"And she's pissed because...?"

"You're supposed to be here," he said patiently.

"Then why am I not?" I replied, confused again. Or maybe still. "I mean, how'd I get here if I'm who you think I am?"

"Good question."

I waited for him to say something more, but silence burned across the connection. He'd sounded honest enough about everything, but I didn't understand how he could claim to know me well but not know about Petor, or what I was doing in Detroit. I mean, I couldn't have just disappeared from Salem. Or had I? If he was my brother, why hadn't I told him I was leaving? How did the Spaniard and Brenda fit into all of this?

Tears burned behind my eyes but I refused to let them fall. I was stronger than that, I could handle not knowing about my past. From what Cormac had said, I'd lived through it before. Then I remembered what Petor had told me, how Chaos had said that we'd be safe here in Detroit. Maybe this Cormac was someone I'd been running from.

"Okay, well, I guess if I am who you say I am, tell everyone I'm fine," I said awkwardly, wanting to break the connection as quickly as possible. "And uh, if I remember any of you, I'll call back."

He said nothing.

"Still there?" I prompted.

"Yeah," he growled.

"You're not real friendly, are you?" I stated bluntly.

"I've been called worse," he admitted. "Tonight in fact."

I guess I wasn't the only one who found him abrasive. "Okay, well, I don't want to keep you or anything," I told him. "I'll let you go."

"Okay."

"Bye," I offered. When he didn't reply, I hung up.

## Adjustments

I'm not aware of too many things  
I know what I know if you know what I mean  
Edie Brickell & New Bohemians - What I Am

After filling Petor in on Cormac's side of the conversation, we went downstairs. I went to Howard first and told him about the Salem prince, Elvira, and my supposed sire, Dougal Galloway. I added that Cormac was Tremere before going to find Madelynne.

"Do you think he's telling you the truth?" Madelynne asked when I had filled her in on the conversation I'd had with Cormac.

"I don't know," I admitted slowly. "He seemed to be telling the truth. He said that he was Tremere and that his sire was my sire." I remembered the Spaniard calling me his childe, but since I hadn't told Madelynne about that conversation, I didn't bring it up now.

She smiled. "You don't look Tremere."

I grinned back at her. "That's what I said."

"You had those claws out when I found you," she reminded me.

I nodded. "I don't remember much, but I don't think Tremere have claws."

"Last I knew, Tremere couldn't run that fast," she added.

"That's a good point." Tremere didn't have Celerity.

She smiled wryly. "Then again neither do we."

"I have no clue," I told her, shaking my head. Apparently I'd been learning alternate disciplines somewhere. "But I thought I'd let you know what was going on."

"Well, I was coming to find you anyway," she told me. "We're gonna have to take you to meet the prince, I've made an appointment."

"The Frenchman."

"Yes. We need to be there soon, we should go."

I glanced at Petor. "What's the protocol on bringing weapons into the prince's place?"

"You can take one if you want," she replied.

"That means the Desert Eagle goes upstairs," I murmured regretfully. I didn't really want to give up any of my guns, but then again I knew better than to offend the prince. From what I could tell I had enough people after me.

"Yeah," she agreed. "Maybe a little one?"

"Which little one?" I asked with a smile. "I have two Glocks and a Walther." I pulled up the leg of my pants to show her the gun at my ankle.

"Whichever one you want, I guess," she told me, "but you'll be relatively safe there so you don't have to worry about it."

"I must have been worried about something because Chaos said we'd be safe here," I reminded her. "Maybe I wasn't safe in Salem."

"It's a possibility," Madelynne agreed, "considering all the weapons you carry."

Petor and I went upstairs and we put one of his guns in a drawer along with the Desert Eagle and the Walther. I decided to keep one of the Glocks because they felt the most familiar in my hand. After removing the holster in the back of my pants I replaced the knife sheath on my wrist and put my jacket on to cover my weapons.

My ghoul decided to change into clean clothes, but I didn't see anything wrong with what I was wearing so I waited in the hall for him to finish. When we came down, Logan and Madelynne led the way to her car.

Once we were on our way, Madelynne explained that the prince had a Gangrel bodyguard. Cassidy rarely left the prince's side, except occasionally with Casilde, his constant companion. No one knew exactly who or what the girl was, but she too was loyal to the prince and helped Cassidy guard him.

Eventually we pulled into the parking garage next to the Renaissance Center, a skyscraper building on the water's edge. After parking, we walked across the street and into the Center itself where a tall thin English Kindred with dark hair met us in the lobby.

Madelynne greeted him. "Hey, Giles."

"Good evening," he replied with a strong English accent. "Right this way."

He led us to a large private elevator and set the car moving upward. We went up a long time before the doors finally opened on a luxurious waiting room. On one side was a plush couch and straight ahead was a short hallway that led to two large oak doors.

Madelynne led the way across the room and knocked on the door. When a male voice called out for us to enter, she opened the door and we went in.

The prince's office was everything one would expect of a Ventrue. His large desk was prominent, and there were several pieces of art around the room. Two walls were sheer glass from floor to ceiling revealing a breathtaking view of the city.

The Frenchman was sitting at his desk bent over some paperwork he was writing on. He looked older, in his early fifties maybe, his dark hair lightly salted with gray. He wore an eye patch that didn't quite cover a line of scars that ran down the left side of his face.

A Kindred with sandy brown hair stood just behind the prince's right shoulder, which made him the bodyguard Madelynne had told me about. Cassidy was tall and rough looking, wearing a ribbed sweater, pants and boots that were all black. Sunglasses hid his eyes, and his arms were crossed forbiddingly across his chest.

On the other side of the prince stood a woman I knew had to be Casilde. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail and she was a lot shorter than Cassidy, but she was dressed exactly like him down to the dark sunglasses. Of course her clothing fit a little tighter and the heels on her boots were much higher, but she stood in the same unfriendly stance. Unlike Cassidy, she was not a vampire.

We were half way across the room when the prince glanced up and gestured for us to sit in the four chairs in front of his desk. As we sat down I wondered if I'd ever met a prince before. It stood to reason that I must have, Cormac had told me Elvira was pissed that I was missing. Maybe I'd displeased the prince and left town before she could punish me. Maybe I'd fucked something up and she wanted my head on a platter. Maybe Cormac was wrong and he didn't really know me after all. Things were just too confusing.

The Frenchman looked at me expectantly. "And you are?" he prompted in a gruff voice.

"Tina," I told him, trying very hard not to sound nervous. "And this is Petor Andrews."

"Tina," he repeated thoughtfully.

"Uh-huh." There really wasn't anything more I could tell him.

"And Petor." He regarded me speculatively for a long moment. "I'm sure I don't have to tell you the rules of my city. You are familiar with the Masquerade."

It sounded vaguely familiar. "Yes, sir," I assured him much more confidently than I felt.

"Good." He gestured toward Madelynne. "So you're joining up with her little... troop?"

When I glanced at her, she smiled encouragingly. "I believe so," I told the prince.

"Has she explained to you the way your clan works?"

"Well, she told me about the primogen and—" I paused for a moment to glance at Cassidy when he growled at the word 'primogen'. A split second later Casilde growled too. Actually, she had been mimicking his few movements almost perfectly since we'd come in.

"Um, she explained about the primogen," I continued hesitantly. "How he was less than honorable, and that there were a couple of Gangrel that were with the Brujah." I thought for a moment, but that was pretty much the situation so I nodded. "But yeah, she explained everything."

"Good luck," the Frenchman murmured before adding harshly, "Don't fuck up."

"Of course not," I replied quickly and respectfully. "Thank you, sir."

When he looked down and began writing again I glanced at Madelynne, standing when she did. While she took several minutes to thank the prince, I looked at Cassidy's mirror image trying to figure out exactly what she was.

After a moment, something very strange happened. I saw an aura of light around her, colors that were unbelievably vibrant. I watched them for a long moment before I realized I was staring at her. I nodded politely to her and looked away, then turned and followed Madelynne and Logan when they headed for the door.

I was silent as we rode the elevator to the ground. I wasn't sure exactly what I'd seen around Casilde. It could have been her aura, which would mean that I had Auspex. If I did have it, that could mean that Cormac was right and I was Tremere. But I had Celerity too, and Protean. As far as I knew no clan had all three abilities.

Was it possible I was a Caitiff? Did I have friends from a lot of different clans that had taught me things? Then again maybe I didn't have Auspex after all, maybe I had a completely different ability that allowed me to read auras.

Thinking that way made me feel a little better. Cormac may have said he was my brother, but he hadn't exactly been all warm and cozy. I didn't exactly remember any Tremere, but if that was the way they all were, they could keep their distance.

"You should know about Windsor," Madelynne told me when we got in the car. "It's across the river and run by the Wendigo." She turned and looked at me, her face deadly serious in the dim light. "It is highly advised that you do not go there because if you do and something happens, the prince will not help. The Wendigo stay there and we stay here."

She went on to say that there was actually a red line drawn both on the bridge and in the tunnel that crossed the river into Canada. It was more a supernatural border than the actual border between countries, and one few Kindred were eager to cross.

"What are the Wendigo?" I asked, feeling foolish. "Do they just attack you on sight?"

"The Wendigo are the Native American werewolves," she explained. "I've never gone over there because the werereatures can tear us apart in a heartbeat, no second chances. I'd like to keep the life I have with Logan and my friends."

When she looked affectionately at Logan, I felt a twinge of longing. Not that I wanted Logan for myself, I really didn't. What I wanted was the relationship they seemed to have, one of mutual respect, love and trust. Somehow I doubted that I'd had that in Salem if things had been so dangerous for me there.

"There is definitely more of a chance of something happening if you cross that line," Madelynne continued, "and it's possible that one might attack on site. I wouldn't recommend it though." She turned to look at me once more. "Remember, curiosity killed that cat."

"I don't think I want to mess with werewolves," I assured her. "We'll stay on this side of the river." Regardless of how I felt about going to Canada myself, I knew that for Petor's sake I couldn't risk it. I felt an obligation to take care of him that I didn't quite understand. I only knew that I would protect him with my life, and crossing the border would be an unnecessary risk I didn't want to take.

When we got back to Walker's Pub only Howard and Scott were still upstairs. Carissa was apparently down in the basement working on something or another, and the others had gone home. Madelynne asked Howard if he had come up with anything yet, but to my disappointment he told her he was still working on it.

She showed Petor and me around the second floor, making sure he knew where the bathroom and small kitchen were. There was an elevator at the back of the building that no one used much. It ran from the second floor to the basement and had its own little room on each floor. In fact, on the second floor there were several motorcycles parked in the elevator room.

The living room on the second floor had a couple of tables, a bookcase and a desk clustered in one corner. A couch took up most of one wall, and there were several chairs that looked well used. None of the furniture was extravagant, but it was well taken care of.

Scattered around the building were several weapon stashes. I was rather awed of Madelynne's faith in us when she showed them to Petor and me. She didn't know us—hell, I didn't know us—but she trusted us to help defend the pack if we were attacked. I swore to myself that her faith wouldn't go undeserved.

Madelynne told me that Carissa also lived in the building, but the basement was her domain. "She likes to build things. You might as well just leave her alone."

I laughed at the way she said that. She seemed indulgent of Carissa, but apprehensive as to what she might come up with.

"She's got lots of stuff down there," my host told me. "She might be building something really odd, you never know what she's gonna do. But she's a good friend."

She offered to have Lucas exchange my rubbles for dollars in the morning, and told me I could use her car if I needed to until I could find something to drive. I wasn't exactly sure where I would need to go, but I thanked her for the offer.

Petor seemed tired, and I followed him upstairs to make sure he had everything he needed for the night, and that he would keep a loaded gun nearby while he slept. I knew he was a big boy and could take care of himself, but that didn't stop me from worrying about him.

Logan and Madelynn were sitting together on the couch when I came back down, and they looked rather cozy. Scott was watching television, but he looked bored. I wasn't sure what I was supposed to be doing, but I knew what I wanted to do. I sat down near Scott and worked on getting to know him better.

At first he was the perfect image of the strong silent type, speaking only when spoken to and then not very much. His reticence intrigued me, and I worked at drawing him out. I wanted to get to know this Kindred, to find out if he could be for me what he was for the rest of the pack. God knows I needed something to make me feel safe.

It took some effort, but eventually I got Scott to relax a bit. At first he treated me like he did Emily, but soon he was paying more attention to me than the television, even responding to my gentle teasing with smiles and laughter. Madelynn and Logan joined our conversation and we spent the next few hours talking about a lot of different things. Occasionally Howard would have something to add to our conversation.

I did bring up the mindspeak I'd experienced earlier in the evening. Rather than thinking I was crazy, Madelynn wanted to know more about it. We agreed that unless I wanted to allow the connections to stay open and talk to the intruder, I would never find out how and why it was happening. I didn't want to let strangers into my mind, but there seemed no other alternative.

I checked on Petor so many times during the night that Madelynn suggested I get a baby monitor. I couldn't explain the need I felt to make sure he was safe so I didn't try. It was like I had this driving need inside of me that I couldn't resist.

By the time the pub closed at two o'clock, I felt as if I really belonged in the pack. I believed that if I was Tremere I wouldn't have gotten along with Scott as well as I did, not to mention Madelynn and the others. It seemed to me that Tremere were stuffy and rude, like the one I'd talked to on the phone. He must have been wrong about who I was, or lying.

It wasn't hard to talk Scott into going downstairs to play pool in the pub with me. I wasn't very good at it, but he was. He won every game but I didn't mind much, I liked watching him play. Something about the way he looked and moved appealed to me. His dark blond hair fell in his face occasionally, and he would toss his head to get it out of his eyes. His chest was muscular, and so were his legs beneath the close fitting jeans he wore.

When he started absently twirling his pool stick, I talked him into showing me how to do it. I wasn't as good at it as he was, but did pick it up rather quickly. It made me feel better to know that even if I didn't have the skills I needed to protect Petor and the pack, I could at least learn them easily enough.

When I finally retired to my room, I took my necklaces off one by one and studied each of them for clues to my identity or what might have happened to me. The pendant with Russian writing didn't reveal anything I hadn't seen earlier, so I laid it aside. I looked at the wedding rings, but nothing about them was familiar, and there were no engravings inside the bands.

After thinking about it carefully I decided I probably wasn't married. If I was I would have been wearing the rings on my hand, not around my neck, and I wouldn't have had the man's ring. Perhaps I had been married once and my husband had died. Maybe I wore the rings around my neck to remind me of him. Honestly I had no idea what the truth was.

One of the crosses I wore was small and made of silver. It was smooth, but somehow looked old. Another cross was a bit larger and also silver. It almost looked like a Knights Templar cross, but I couldn't be sure. Hell, I couldn't even remember who the Knights Templar were. The third cross was

quite large, about three inches tall and two across. It was gold, and Celtic knot work covered its surface. The design was pretty, if unfamiliar.

There were a few other religious symbols among the necklaces I was wearing. A gold ankh hung from a string of black leather, and a silk cord held a silver pentacle. I wondered if I had been a religious person after all, and if I had been what religion I had followed. Of course there was no way for me to tell, and I truly didn't remember.

There was another ring hanging from my neck that I hadn't noticed earlier. It was a man's high school ring from Helena, Montana and it was strung on a cheap silver chain. Had I been there once? Did I know someone there who could help me? Again, I could not remember.

Hanging from yet another chain was an elongated triangle with the point facing downward. The chain was silver and very fine, but looked strong despite its delicate appearance. Whatever significance the symbol might have once held for me were now buried in the recesses of my mind and where I couldn't reach it.

I laid in the bed waiting for dawn trying to think my way through the situation logically. What did I know about myself? I knew I had Protean, and Celerity, for certain. It was possible that I had Auspex, or something like it. Being with Gangrel seemed natural to me. Given that, the Protean and my clothes, I was convinced that I was Gangrel myself.

Petor was from Russia and had once been in the Russian army, working in the motor pool. He was my ghoul, under my protection. He liked Vodka and guns. He'd passed out in Smolensk and, after a brief stop in a castle somewhere, found himself standing over me on the street in Detroit.

When we visited the prince I'd felt naked without my guns, so I had to believe that I normally wore them most if not all of the time. There was a few hundred dollars in my pocket, maybe the same in Rubbles. With all that money it was quite possible I'd been into something illegal. Either that or I was running from someone or some thing. Given the amount of weapons we had between us and the fact that Chaos had told Petor we would be safe in Detroit, I was betting we were on the run.

It was clear to me that Chaos was my friend, and that he'd been trying to protect me from someone when he left us in Detroit, perhaps from the person who had caused our memory loss. Petor had fled with me, or I had met him in Russia and ghoulled him there. Chaos had sent us to Detroit thinking we'd be safe there, but he hadn't counted on me trying to find out who I was.

I wondered what had happened in Salem that had made me run. It had probably been a mistake to tell Cormac where we were; if he had been involved in the trouble I'd been in he'd probably send someone after us. Petor and I would have to be very careful until we figured out what was going on.

Near sunrise I climbed into bed and waited for the numbing sleep to claim me. While the sun was in the sky I dreamed of being trapped in a room with enemies on all sides. No matter how many I killed, they just kept coming until the floor was littered with bodies and the smell of blood and sulfur permeated the room.

## *Immediate Family*

'Cause you mean nothing to me  
A memory I've left behind  
BBMak - Love Is Leaving

When I woke the next evening I was alone. I listened to the quiet around me, for a moment disoriented and confused from the nightmares that had haunted me. Then I remembered my responsibilities and went to look for Petor. He wasn't in his room.

Swallowing the panic that threatened to overwhelm me, I hurried downstairs to the living area. From the bottom of the steps I saw him sitting on the couch reading a magazine. Relief flooded me and I leaned against the wall waiting for it to pass.

As I walked across the room toward my ghoul, Lucas entered from another door. He told me he was in a bit of a hurry but that he wanted to make sure I had the money he had exchanged for me. I took it gratefully and thanked him before he went back downstairs.

Petor looked up when I sat beside him on the couch. "Are you okay?" I asked, focusing on the money in my hand so as not to reveal how frightened I'd been a few minutes ago.

"I'm fine," he assured me patiently.

I nodded and counted out fifty dollars from the money in my hand. "I would appreciate it if you would be around when I wake up," I said softly as I handed the money to Petor. "That way I won't have a heart attack trying to find you."

I could tell he didn't understand my request, but he agreed. Feeling better than I had so far this evening, I went up to take a shower. After drying my hair and dressing in clean clothes I felt even better yet. The black jeans I'd chosen fit perfectly, tight enough to show off my form but not so tight I couldn't fight or run in them. The dark blue tank top revealed less cleavage than the one I'd worn the night before and looked good against the silver and gold of my necklaces.

After pulling on the black boots I'd worn the night before I began arming myself. Logan had found a shoulder holster for the Desert Eagle, but since the gun was so large I left it upstairs while Petor and I went downstairs to the bar.

We found Madelynne and Logan sitting at a table going over some paperwork. I offered to help out at the bar, and Petor tentatively mentioned that he was good with cars. Logan asked him to look at Scott's truck, while Madelynne instructed me in the basics of waitressing.

Scott came downstairs a little while later, with Howard coming in not too long after. He had identifications for Tina Elizabeth Andrews and Petor Marcus Andrews, siblings. According to our birth certificates, we'd grown up in a small Michigan town and were both US citizens. Our passports showed travel to Russia, although Petor's revealed more frequent visits. His driver's license was also different than mine, with a trucker driver's designation. Our current address was a false one somewhere in the area of Walker's Pub.

Howard had checked around and found accounts under the name of Christina Kline with what seemed like a lot of money in them, but he didn't think it was a good idea to transfer the funds. Someone else had been looking at the accounts, although there was no way for him to tell whom without more digging.

Waiting tables didn't come easy to me. I had resigned myself to sweeping the floor when I felt a tingling at the back of my mind. It was like I'd felt last night when my mind had been invaded, but

there were no words coming across to me, just a sense that I wasn't alone and the muffled sounds of a car engine and voices.

Then I felt a woman's emotions come through the connection, emotions of concern, love and worry. Without a word I made my way to the woman's bathroom and into an empty stall where I sat down and concentrated on the mind link. I didn't understand how Brenda could keep contacting me this way. I knew from the feel that it had to be her although she said nothing.

*In the distance of her mind I heard a man's voice. Where are we going to start looking?*

*Don't we have to see the prince first? another man replied.*

*I mean after that, the first man said.*

The reply sent fear shooting through me. *Gangrel hangouts?*

Before I could wonder if they were in Detroit looking for me I began to receive images in my mind. They were snapshots mostly, pictures frozen in time but tinged with a love and affection that I could not remember ever experiencing.

In my mind's eye I saw a tall man with light brown hair standing with a girl who looked an awfully lot like me. He was wearing a tuxedo and her wedding dress was beautifully covered in beads and sequins. They were holding hands and staring into each other's eyes as if nothing else existed.

Then I saw the same couple walking through a dark park, laughing together. They were shadowed by a second man whose face I couldn't really see, although his gun was visible enough. It was plain that she trusted both of them to the extent that she cared nothing for the dangers that might be lurking in the night around them.

The picture changed to a small shop where three women were examining an expensive suit. One of the women looked exactly like me, and she seemed happy enough to be there. The second woman had hair a little lighter than mine, and was talking to the third woman, who I couldn't really see.

An image of a large Victorian style living room filled my mind. The fireplace was hung with holly and lights with a large fire in the hearth. Small Christmas trees were on every table in the room. In a corner was a huge pine tree that nearly reached the fourteen-foot ceiling. It was covered in antique ornaments, white lights, and burgundy bows. Gaily wrapped presents covered the floor beneath and around the tree, and a tall dark haired man grinned mischievously up at someone who looked just like me. His blue eyes held something like adoration and they were both wearing warm winter robes.

I'd had enough of the slide show. *Okay, okay, that's enough, I projected toward Brenda.*

Thankfully the pictures stopped, but while she said nothing the connection remained open.

*Who are you and how do you have access to my mind?* I demanded.

A picture of a dark handsome man filled my mind. His long hair was pulled back in a ponytail, and his dark Hispanic eyes looked at me with all the affection and patience of a father looking at his child. The image confused me, as I had felt certain that it was Brenda I was connected with.

*You're a Spanish guy?*

The image changed to that of a beautiful woman. Her long dark hair fell far past her shoulders, covering a stylish blouse that must have cost more money than I had on me at the moment. Makeup complimented her features, and accented the deep brown of her eyes.

*You're a.... he/she?* I asked dryly. *Are you the Spaniard or the fashion model?*

The picture of the woman faded, but nothing else, no explanation to tell me exactly who the mind invader was.

*Come on, I said impatiently. You were talkative enough last night, speak up.*

*Brenda, came the simple reply.*

*The fact that I'd been right about her identity made me feel a little better. Brenda, the rather intrusive person from last night.*

*Your sister, she told me.*

Immediately I was suspicious of her words. If she were my sister, wouldn't she have known where I was and why? Unless she, like Cormac, was part of what I was running from. *So you say.*

Again I heard the first man's voice through her mind. *Is she doing something?*

*This time a third man answered. I believe that she is communicating.*

*Can you track that? the first man asked, excited. Can she track that?*

Once again a picture of the Hispanic man filled my mind this time coupled with the word *Antonio*. The love and trust in his eyes made my heart ache and suddenly I realized who he must be.

*Okay, the other really intrusive person from last night, I murmured. He was a bit more intrusive.*

*He is your sire.*

Her claim only served to make me mistrust her more. While the Spaniard had told me he had found and taken care of me, he had not claimed to be my sire. According to Cormac, Dougal Galloway was my sire. *No he's not.*

*He is not the one who turned you, she admitted, but he is the one who adopted you when you woke up in an alley in Las Vegas and had no memories of your life.*

Brenda and the Spaniard, Antonio, seemed to be on the same wavelength at least. I decided to see if they were both sharing information with Cormac. *Well according to that... How to describe him? ...really rude guy that I talked to last night—*

*Who is that? she asked.*

*Cormac.*

*Cormac Brennan, she murmured.*

I got the feeling she didn't exactly like him, which made two of us. *Whatever.*

*He and you share your true sire, she told me. The one who turned you, the one who made you. He made him as well.*

*So he says, was my reply.*

Another picture worked its way into my mind, this one of a man and a woman. He had dark hair and hazel eyes that looked at the woman with a combination of love and irritation that I found intriguing. Her long dark hair framed a beautiful heart shaped face that was smiling up at him. Her expression was almost innocent, but something about her brown eyes belied the look she was trying to achieve. I didn't recognize either of them.

*This is supposed to be important to me?*

*Yes, she insisted. Family is important to you.*

Maybe it was and maybe it wasn't. At this point staying alive and keeping Petor safe were all that was important to me. *Okay, here's my take on it.* I shot back firmly. *Family got me in this mess.*

*She seemed confused. How do you figure that?*

*Well, I wasn't safe where I was, I told her, and a friend got me out of there.*

*You weren't safe living in Salem, in my house, she demanded, obviously astonished at my words, with your husband, with your ghoul—*

I couldn't tell if she was lying or not, but whatever her claims, she was wrong. *Whatever.*

Yet another image of a man filled my mind, this one far more pleasing. His light brown hair fell across his forehead in a way that made want to reach out and brush it back. His hazel eyes were filled with so much love and devotion that it made me want to weep. His face was perfect, with high cheekbones and lips that were made for kissing. The longing that shot through me took my by surprise. This was the man she had shown me with the woman who'd looked like me.

*Pretty,* I admitted begrudgingly.

*Jason Kline, she said with a hint of satisfaction in her tone. He is your husband.*

*I'm not married. At least, there were no rings on my fingers. Without thought I reached for the wedding rings on their chains around my neck.*

In my mind's eye I saw the girl who looked like me in a bridal store. She was holding a wedding dress up in front of a mirror and staring at her reflection with a dopey smile on her face. The image meant nothing, but part of the name Brenda had given me did.

*I remember!* I sent her a picture of gun Petor and I had found in the case, specifically the barrel and its inscription 'The Klines 10-9-1999'.

*That was a gift to you from Cormac when you and Jason married, she said softly. Jason has an identical one.*

*Okay, I thought to myself, so that gun's mine, not Petor's.*

Brenda was apparently listening in. *Yes, that gun is yours.*

I didn't like the fact that she had access to my thoughts. *You know, I really think that I have too many guns and there has to be a reason for it,* I said angrily, *so I think that it's best that I not deal with Salem.*

*Through her mind I could hear an engine turn off and car doors open and shut. I hope that you will remember, she said sadly, because you are my sister and I love you.*

*What if there's a reason that I'm not supposed to remember? I demanded. What if it protects me from something?*

*What does Malcolm have to do with this?* she asked.

*Who?* I'd never heard the name.

*You remember Malcolm,* she drawled.

*I remembered nothing. I'm afraid not.*

*The man who had your true love abducted, she continued, her words dripping with hate and scorn. The man who had your friend Lena abducted.*

*It's not ringing any bells, I replied truthfully.*

*The man who was your mentor when you were human, she finished coldly. I know he's behind this and I will take care of him.*

*I have no idea what you're talking about.* If this man Malcolm had been my mentor, why would he have done the awful things she said unless I was just as evil as he was? She had to be lying.

*We shall see each other,* she insisted.

*Not if I see you first,* I vowed as I slammed the connection closed. Thankfully it stayed that way. The only good thing that had come out of the conversation was that now I knew what my enemies looked like.

I sat in the stall for a long time with my head in my hands trying to figure out what to do. I had some money, but not enough to start over in another city. I had no idea what sort of skill set I had, what kind of work I could do to earn a living for Petor and myself. I needed the haven that Madelynne had offered us, but every moment we stayed with her I placed the entire pack in danger.

It was only when the stall door opened that I realized I wasn't alone. I glanced up to see Scott looking down at me with concern on his face.

"You okay?" he asked softly.

"Yeah," I replied, trying to smile. "I just don't understand what's going on and how this woman could mind speak with me."

"What clan is she?" It was the longest sentence I'd heard him utter without prompting.

"Let's see," I murmured aloud. "She says that she's my adopted sire's childe and I think he's supposed to be Tremere, so I assume she's Tremere." Tremere, the warlocks of Kindred society. Tight knit and lethal to their enemies. I stood quickly. "Oh shit, we're in trouble. I gotta find Madelynne."

Scott stood aside and followed me back into the bar. Madelynne was still sitting with Logan and they both looked up when we approached.

"What's wrong?" she asked at the look on my face.

I wasn't sure how to explain the mess I was in. "I think I have a bunch of Tremere after me," I admitted softly. "It might be a good idea if maybe I found an alternate place to stay so that I don't put you all in danger."

She smiled indulgently. "No, you'll be fine here."

"I don't want to put you in danger." Maybe she didn't understand the gravity of the situation.

Logan laughed softly. "This is the safest place for you," he told me, a note of finality in his voice.

Madelynne's expression told me she believed her lover's words. Even Scott looked like he agreed with Logan. As much as I wanted to leave, I knew there was no way I could make it on my own, let alone protect Petor. I did the only thing I could do; I caved.

"As long as you're sure," I said softly. "I don't want to put any of you in danger."

"Everything will be all right," Madelynne assured me before going back to her paperwork.

Reluctantly I found the broom where I had left it and went back to cleaning the floors. A little while later Petor came in and we sat down at a table while he ate and told me how he'd fixed Scott's truck. I didn't mention the mindspeak I'd had with Brenda or the concern I had for our future. One of us worrying was quite enough.

# *Falling Forward*

Feeling like I'm taken lightly  
Think you see right through me  
Default - Live a Lie

Around ten o'clock that night I got the strangest feeling. It wasn't like the mind invasion I'd felt earlier, it was more of an urgent need to visit the prince. Madelynne and Logan had apparently gotten the same message, and within minutes we were on our way.

Scott drove with Petor in the front seat beside him. Neither of them had felt the call, but Madelynne had wanted the backup that Scott could provide if we were intercepted on the road, and I couldn't bear to leave Petor behind. They wouldn't visit the prince with us, but Madelynne assured me that Scott would be able to protect my ghoul while they waited in the car.

"What exactly did Howard tell you about what he'd found?" she asked when we were on our way to the Renaissance Center.

"He said that he'd found some accounts in Salem," I told her, "but that someone else had been looking at them."

"He was able to trace that person back to Salem," she said softly. "He also found out that a private jet from that city landed here this morning. He's still looking for more information."

Apparently my past was doing its best to come back and bite me in the ass. I tried to put my concerns out of my mind when we got to the Renaissance Center. Giles led us directly upstairs to the Frenchman's office and ushered us in. We sat when the prince told us to and waited for him to begin.

"There is a group from Salem here looking for you," he said after a long moment, turning a fierce gaze on me. "They are under the impression that you are Tremere. Is this true?" He didn't look happy at the idea I might have lied to him the night before.

"Honestly, I have no idea," I replied, meeting his eye. "I'm having a slight memory problem."

He didn't quite look like he believed me. "Yes."

"From what I've seen she's only shown Celerity and Protean," Madelynne told him.

"They seem rather bent on your retrieval," he murmured thoughtfully. "The gentlemen of the group were rather tense. I don't want any problems in my city."

"I don't wish to cause any problems in your city," I assured him quickly. "However, I don't know these people."

"They seem to know you." When he held up a photograph a black tendril came out of nowhere and took it from his hand.

When it reached me, I took the picture and studied the couple it showed, the same couple that Brenda had given me a vision of earlier. The man was tall and handsome with dark blond hair that fell over his forehead, wearing a black tuxedo the cut of which showed off his broad shoulders to perfection. Standing next to him was a dark haired woman with green eyes. The bodice of her white dress was covered in beads and sequins, and she was holding a beautiful bouquet of flowers.

What struck me was not the fact that it was obviously a wedding portrait or the fact that the woman looked exactly like me. The remarkable thing about the photograph was the bliss that seemed to emanate from the couple. It was as if the night captured on film was the happiest one of

their existence. Was I that woman? Had I lost the joy that had been so tangible that day? What in God's name had gone wrong?

"Well, this appears to be me," I admitted reluctantly, burying my questions and fears. "However, I honestly don't know if it is me or not. Perhaps it is someone who looks like me. I as far as I know have not shown any Tremere disciplines, only Gangrel."

He nodded. "Yes. I recommend we come to a resolution to this before I have to resolve it."

I didn't like the sounds of that. His idea of a resolution could mean the removal of my head. What I wanted was for the Salem group to leave me alone and go back to the hell from whence they'd come. How could I keep Petor safe if the very people I'd been running from wouldn't leave me alone?

After a moment's contemplation I knew I had only once choice. If I met with these people maybe I could convince them that I wasn't who they thought I was and that I would never return to the home they swore I'd left behind. Maybe if they saw my resolve, they would give up and leave me alone. Hell, maybe they'd realize I wasn't the woman they were looking for. I didn't hold out much hope that they would do so, but the prince had given me no other choice.

"I certainly don't want to cause problems in your city," I told the prince softly. "Perhaps if it were possible to meet with them in a neutral location."

"The Sanctuary," Madelynne suggested.

The prince sat back, apparently satisfied. "Yes, that would be good."

Madelynne looked at me. "In the Sanctuary, you cannot get hurt. No weapons are allowed, no fighting."

"There will be time to explain it to her before the meeting," the prince interrupted. "Tomorrow, eight pm."

"No weapons, no violence," I agreed.

"I will tell them to expect you," he added dismissively. "That is all."

"Thank you," I said as I rose to my feet. I shot a searching look at Casilde before following the others out the door, but I couldn't see anything in the air around her. In the elevator on the way downstairs I stared unobtrusively at Madelynne and Logan trying to find some kind of aura around them, but I saw nothing. Perhaps I'd only imagined seeing Casilde's aura the night before.

"Are you sure this is a good idea, this whole meeting thing?" I asked Madelynne when we left the building. "I mean, I spoke before I could think."

"I think it's the best way to find out who they are," she assured me. "And it's the safest place."

"Well they keep telling me who they are," I said dryly.

Petor and Scott were in the car right where we'd left them, safe and sound. Logan, Madelynne and I sat in the back seat where I stared out the window in silence for a long time. I didn't want to meet the people who were looking for me, but I had no other choice. I could only try and make sure that the meeting didn't hurt those around me.

"Are you sure that you guys need to come with me tomorrow night?" I asked Madelynne softly. "I wouldn't want any of you to be hurt."

"I'm sure," she assured me. "We'll be safe, there is no violence at the Sanctuary or within a three block radius. The owner has werereatures and mages to enforce it, there's no way to get a weapon inside."

"What's to stop anybody from pulling violence?" I asked.

"Big furry bodies," she reminded me.

I shrugged. "You can kill something before the big furry body gets there."

"I'm sure they will be in the room with us," she assured me, "and they are posted at all the doors throughout the bar."

Her words didn't ease my worry because I knew it took only seconds to hurt someone beyond repair. "I just don't want anyone to get hurt because of me."

"There are mages and other Kindred and who knows what else," Logan replied calmly.

"If they were to pull anything, they would die faster than their victims," Madelynne told me before turning to her lover. "We need to make a few phone calls. I want Barkley and Sampson with us tomorrow, if they'll come." Once we got to the bar, she and Logan went off to make those calls. Twenty minutes later she came back and told us that we would be joined at the Sanctuary by three of her friends.

Barkley was Gangrel, but he preferred to spend his time in canine form. He and Sampson, one of the other's they'd called, were both loyal to the prince, but they were friends of the pack and were happy enough to back us up. Sampson's Malkavian girlfriend would also be joining us.

I didn't really like the idea of bringing more people into this mess, but Madelynne was only doing what she felt was best. One thing that I could do was make sure everyone knew how to defend themselves. Scott and Logan assured me that they did, and I had to take them for their word.

I wasn't really surprised to find that I could use the weapons I wore, and use them well. Scott and I went over my arsenal, but I knew before he told me that my guns were well taken care of. Although circumstances wouldn't allow me to make sure I could shoot straight, I was pretty sure I could. And since Petor had been in the Russian army, I figured he could too.

Not surprisingly, I seemed to fall in with Scott's outlook on protecting the pack. They didn't mind him looking after them, and we all quickly realized that Scott and I had the same mind set. We shared many of the same ideas about safety, and by the second sunrise I was finishing his half sentences.

I found myself drawn to Scott for reasons other than the pack's security. He was tall and very well built, and there were moments when I wanted to stop and run my fingers through his hair. His reticence frustrated me, but honestly it was just as well. He made me feel safe, but the last thing I needed was another complication in my life.

There was something about the man Brenda had shown me that stuck in my mind. I kept seeing the love in his eyes, the way his hair fell across his forehead. There were moments when all I could think of was the curve of his lips. I found myself wondering what he smelled like, how soft his skin.

Even feeling the way I did toward the man I'd never seen, I couldn't resist touching Scott in casual ways, much the same that Maggie did with all of the pack members. I knew by the way he looked at me that Scott noticed, but not surprisingly he never mentioned it. Wordiness was definitely not one of Scott's faults.

Maggie and I spent several hours together talking about many different subjects. I think she was trying to get my mind off my worries, and it worked. By the time she went back to her haven we were good friends.

I was restless that night after the others left. I couldn't sit still, couldn't stop worrying about the people who were after me. Scott walked me through the building's defenses again, and while I couldn't find anything wrong with them, I couldn't bring myself to believe they were good enough to keep my enemies out. It helped a little when Scott hinted at secret stashes and hidey-holes that he was quite secretive about, but he didn't tell me where they were.

Petor and I spent an hour or so in a cleared area of the bar going over defensive moves. When we started I wasn't sure how good I'd be, but it turned out that neither of us were half bad. I couldn't guarantee we could fight off shapeshifters, but I was satisfied that we'd be able to defend ourselves if the group from Salem decided to attack.

An hour or so before dawn I realized that my anxiousness was affecting everyone else. I sent Petor to bed and secluded myself in my room, hoping the solitude would ease my nerves. It didn't. I sat down to try and meditate, thinking that if I emptied my mind I would stop worrying. I was wrong.

How could I protect Petor and the pack from whoever it was that was after me? How could I hope to keep them safe? The only way I could think of was to leave them, but I wasn't willing to do that. If I didn't look after Petor, who would? I knew the pack would be safe without me, but I still felt as though I had to protect them too, which was ridiculous. They'd looked after themselves long before I'd come along, but I couldn't help the way I felt.

I couldn't see any way out of the mess I'd gotten myself into. Staying with my friends put them in danger, but leaving them was not an option. I was caught between a rock and a hard place with a hammer about ready to fall. Dawn was a long time in coming.

Sleep only served to enhance my fears. I dreamed of a long stone stairway, of running upward with my friends not far behind me. The stairs, rough-hewn and lit by flickering torches, seemed to go on forever. One by one every member of the pack fell behind only to be devoured by a huge wolf that pursued me. Finally I was dragging Petor along to keep him from the monster, but his weight slowed me down. I woke as the fangs of the beast sank into my ankle.

The next evening I paced the bar restlessly while I waited for the time to leave. Petor seemed to understand my unease, and did his best to keep me calm. When the time finally came, Madelynn, Logan, Petor and I went in her car while Alex and Scott followed in the latter's truck.

Sampson, Lady Morgana and Barkley met us in the parking lot of the Sanctuary. Barkley was striking to say the least. He had quite a few frenzy marks, everything from dog eyes to whiskers. Lady Morgana didn't seem threatening at all until I remembered she was Malkavian. Sampson seemed to dote on her, but he was obviously capable of taking care of himself. We locked our weapons in our vehicles and headed into the bar.

We had to pass through metal detectors and the inspection of people Madelynn later told me were mages in order to get inside. Once there she pointed out the uniform that the security team wore. Not everyone wearing the bar's t-shirts was a werewoman, but most were. I kept trying to look everywhere at once, but I didn't see anyone who looked like anybody in the visions Brenda had shown me.

One of the security crew led us up two flights of stairs to a meeting room where the prince awaited us. A very large man was standing outside the door. He looked too big to be human, and there was something bear-like about him. Another man who seemed, well, furry opened the door and let us in.

The Frenchman was waiting at the head of the table, with Cassidy and Casilde at his back wearing gangster style suits. Casilde was taller than she'd been the night before, and to my surprise I saw

whiskers on her face along with a light sprinkling of dark fur. Something about her posture and markings screamed 'feline' to me. On Cassidy's right shoulder I could see the tip of a tail flicking near his collar, but I didn't think it was his own. Giles introduced Jac Nelson, who sat on the prince's right, and Mickey Valentine, on his left. Both were Ventrue and neither looked particularly happy to be there.

The prince and his entourage were not the only ones in the room. Giles explained that several members of the Tremere clan had asked to be present, and proceeded to introduce them to us. Countess Victoria was the clan primogen of Detroit, and she had brought Missy, the clan enforcer, and Senior Zachary dela Rocha with her. From her reaction, Madelynne hadn't realized that any Tremere would be at the meeting.

I stepped closer to Scott. I wasn't afraid of the Tremere, but then again I wasn't stupid either. Besides, if Scott was the security blanket for the rest of the pack, why couldn't he be mine too?

Standing around the room were several humans and a number of shapeshifters who weren't quite in human form. One was a Hispanic guy who's clothing didn't quite conceal a number of tattoos that covered his chest. Another was tall and Swedish looking. All were intimidating to say the least.

We hadn't been seated very long when the two shapeshifters from the hall joined us. The one that looked like a bear said something in a low voice to Giles, who then turned to the prince.

"The Salem delegation is here, my prince," he announced formally.

## *Intervention*

Well, if I could, you know I would  
Let salvation reign on you  
Collective Soul - Sister Don't Cry

The woman I recognized as Brenda entered first and she greeted me with a smile. I'm sure she was hoping that her friendly face would earn some trust from me, but I could have told her not to bother. She was more beautiful in person than she'd led me to believe. Her long dark hair, slim form and generous breasts made me feel like a schoolgirl in comparison.

Behind her came a human I didn't recognize. He was taller than Brenda, probably six foot. His dark hair fell just past his shoulders, and his eyes never strayed from Brenda for long. By the lack of space between the two of them, I was betting he was her ghoul if not her lover.

Then Jason walked into the room and I was instantly spellbound. It was as if I'd always known the man, like he was a part of me that had been missing. I tried to dismiss the feeling, I didn't remember the guy after all, but I couldn't shake it. After my reaction to his image in my mind I had expected to be attracted to him, but this was ridiculous. I felt like a teenaged girl infatuated with a movie star.

His eyes found me and their hazel depths drew me deeper into my newfound obsession. He looked at me as if no other woman in the world existed. I wanted to touch the soft skin of his cheek, to breathe in the scent of his hair, to feel his cool hands on my body. If I were human I would have been blushing. As it was it took a sheer effort of will to look away from the intensity in his gaze.

I didn't recognize the next man who walked into the room. He was Kindred, tall, blonde and wearing an Armani suit like he'd been born in it. He shot a quick glance around the room and smiled reassuringly when he saw me, but I was far from reassured.

The fourth man had been in one of the visions Brenda had sent me. He was taller than Jason, with dark hair and a square jaw. His eyes were a deep blue that moved over me in a way I wasn't sure I liked. While there seemed to be a hidden sexual undertone to his gaze, he looked at me as if he was making sure I was still in one piece. Why didn't any of them believe I could take care of myself?

The last person to enter was another Kindred I didn't recognize. His hair was quite short, and he was the sort of nondescript man who made a good detective for he was unremarkable at best. His eyes ran over me once in a quick inventory, then moved on to scan the room.

The Frenchman looked pointedly at the blond Kindred, and he quickly approached the table.

"My prince, allow me to introduce myself," the man said formally. "I am Michael Moorecock, and these are my friends."

"Yes," the Frenchman replied. "Giles told me of your arrival."

"It is a pleasure to be in your company," he continued, "and thank you for your hospitality and for accepting me into your city."

"You know the rules of my city?" the prince demanded.

"More than any here, aside from our own," he replied smoothly.

"Very well."

The prince introduced the newcomers to everyone as they sat down. James Price, child of the Salem Sheriff, sat next to Jac. Beside him Michael held a chair for Brenda Brown before seating himself. He seemed immensely pleased with himself for some reason, but she ignored him and placed a photo album on the table in front of her

When Jason approached the table, he did something I didn't understand. He turned his head and sat with some apparent difficulty. He kept his gaze on the table and did not look at me again.

Frasier O'Connell sat down next to him. While I'd seen his face in the vision Brenda had sent me, I did not know the man. He apparently knew me, however. He looked happy to see me, so happy in fact that I thought for a moment he would come around the table to join me. Unconsciously I edged a little closer to Scott.

Rafe Brown reluctantly sat at the end of the group. His body language showed that he didn't like the seating arrangements, but he didn't object. I found it interesting to note that he and Brenda shared a last name and I wondered if they were married.

The prince continued his introductions around the table and, despite Madelynne's protests, he gave all of our full names. I could almost see the wheels moving behind Brenda's eyes as she took note of those names.

"My prince, may I make a request please?" Brenda began when he had finished the introductions.

"Of me?" he asked.

"No," she admitted.

"I am merely here as an observer," he informed her. "To make sure that no rules are violated."

She looked across the table at me for the first time since she sat down. "Jason has an aversion to crosses. Do you think perhaps you could cover them or remove them?"

I looked down at the half dozen or so crosses around my neck. Carefully I picked each one up and tucked them beneath my shirt. When Jason's demeanor did not change, I looked questioningly back to Brenda.

"Is it just the crosses?" I asked, picking up an ankh and holding it out a few inches from my chest. "Do the other things affect him as well?"

Jason cringed at my movement, leading me to believe it wasn't just the crosses.

"It would be any religious symbol," she replied, gesturing toward my necklaces.

"In the interest of making headway and all politeness," Michael murmured, "it seems to be necessary to remove them from the room perhaps, or put them in your purse? I hate to see him grovel."

I didn't have a purse, but since I wasn't taking them off it was a moot point. Still, I knew we couldn't get very far if the man who was supposed to be my husband couldn't even look me in the eye. Since almost half of the remaining items around my neck could be considered holy symbols in some culture or another I decided to make things easy. I gathered the lot of them in a fist and tucked them inside my shirt, thankful that I'd chosen to wear one with a neckline high enough to conceal them.

Immediately Jason relaxed. "Thank you, hon," he said softly, finally looking up at me again with an expression of longing in his eyes so strong that I could almost feel its caress against my skin.

I realized suddenly that there was something about him, well, him and the man next to him, that pulled at the edge of my consciousness. It was some kind of vibe that I really couldn't put my finger on. Jason was attractive, of course, but it was more than that. Besides, the mortal simply wasn't *that* cute.

My eyes kept returning to Jason's face. Aside from the vibe, something about him drew me like a moth to a flame. I wanted to know him, to know every part of both his mind and his body. The feelings his presence evoked in me made me admit to myself that I must have known him before my memory loss. How could I have forgotten a man who had such a profound effect on me?

Giles stepped forward, breaking my contemplation. "As the prince has said, he is here merely as an observer, I shall be facilitating this meeting." He turned to the group from Salem. "The story as I understand it is that you are under the impression that Miss Andrews is your... sister?"

"Yes, sir," Brenda replied firmly.

"And she doesn't remember." He turned to look at me encouragingly. "Please." He seemed to want me to say something, but I had no idea where to begin. Of course Brenda took over.

"Two evenings ago we were in the house in Salem that Christina and her husband Jason share with my husband and I," she announced, looking at me. "Christina noticed a rip in her shirt and went upstairs to change. It was taking her an unusually long time to return so Jason went upstairs to check on her. He found the door locked and when he broke in there was a fae in the room."

Jason's low growl told me that he didn't like the reminder of that night.

"It had taken on the guise of Christina and was talking to the bedpost," she continued. "The rest of us went upstairs to see what the commotion was. When we arrived, we saw the fae and two others who joined the first. We attempted to find out from them what happened to Christina, however they gave us no evidence of where she was, in fact they toyed with us."

As she spoke, I watched Jason to see what effect her words were having on him. For a man desperate to find his wife, he seemed quite under control. Once in a while he looked up at me, but every time he did I looked away, afraid that my eyes would reveal the pull I felt toward him.

Brenda went into some detail about how they had found me, the phone conversation Frasier had had with Petor, the mind links both she and her sire Antonio had performed, and the phone calls I'd made to Salem.

"When Christina was embraced she lost the memories of her time as a mortal," she told us. "Recently she has come into contact with another Kindred who now resides in Salem that also had the same sire as she. It has been revealed that when someone of that bloodline embraced someone, they lose their memory. Through the process of this individual now coming into contact with his own memories of his past before his embrace, she found out that in order to regain her own she had to connect with those from her past."

It was obvious she was talking about Cormac, the guy who'd said we shared a sire. I wondered why she was being so careful about not using his name.

"She has a brother that is a mortal mage who resides in Europe," she added.

"Robert," Jason murmured. Though he'd spoken quietly, I heard him as clearly as if he'd been sitting right next to me.

Brenda ignored him and moved on. "Through interaction with him she was beginning to regain some of her memories. A few months ago she found out about an association that she had as a mortal with a man by the name of Malcolm Robbins."

Jason moved uncomfortably in his chair, as if the very name caused him pain.

"Prior to Christina's embrace, she was a mage of the Verbena tradition and this man was her mentor," Brenda continued. "This man also was responsible in part for Jason's capture and embrace several years ago."

Which explained his aversion to the name. Still, it meant absolutely nothing to me.

Michael chose that moment to speak up. "With all history and background aside, I think it is clear that we know our friend and that she has a problem. It is of the utmost importance that everyone on both sides of the table help us and help her to regain her former self." He looked at me like he knew me, which he obviously believed that he did. "We have spent much time with her, and I believe Brenda divulges possibly a few too many past histories, for our secrets are our own to keep. I have spent much time with this girl, and though I see no recognition in her eyes of me, nor of her own husband, she is the Christina we are looking for."

At that Jason slowly took a ring from his finger and gently pushed it across the table toward me. I put my hand over it to keep it from continuing onto the floor, but didn't look down at it. I wasn't sure I was ready to face their version of the truth about my past.

"It would be in the utmost interest of good Camarilla politics," Michael stated, looking at me as if I should be grateful for his gaze, "for those with whom Christina, or Tina, has taken refuge with to help us in regaining our friend."

Giles stepped forward a little, motioning toward our side of the table. He looked first at Madelynn, then at me, but I still didn't know what to say to these people. I didn't want to be the woman they were looking for.

"Do you remember any of us?" Jason asked softly.

"Well, Brenda sent me an image of herself and of you," I replied, uncomfortable to be the center of attention, "but no, I don't remember you."

Thankfully Madelynn saw my unease. "I found her in the road two nights ago. She was half passed out, with Petor standing over her."

Immediately all eyes turned to my ghoul. I didn't like the way the Salem group was looking at him. Suspicion burned on their faces and it made me fear for his safety. I was about to speak up when Madelynn continued.

"I found her lying in the road, Petor was over her trying to awaken her," she clarified. "I found her with claws on her hand."

Brenda looked at Madelynn with a pleased smile on her face. "Christina does have Protean abilities."

"We've figured that out," she drawled in return. "I took her in. She has shown no Tremere abilities whatsoever, she knows nothing of it."

"She cannot remember her own name, much less her abilities," Michael replied.

"My name is Tina," I said firmly if not irritably. I wasn't about to let them continue to talk about me as if I wasn't in the room.

"I'm sorry," he apologized. "I didn't mean to speak of you in the third person."

"She has shown other abilities besides that," Madelynnne told them cryptically.

"We're not trying to prove or disprove how she got to where she was," Michael began.

"We are not holding her against her will," she shot back, obviously upset with his veiled accusation. "We have taken her in and given her a place to stay."

"This is understandable," Brenda murmured to Madelynnne. "We believe that the mage I spoke of earlier has had something to do with the state that she is in now. We currently have individuals both of the Tremere and the mage world trying to find a counter spell. That is the only thing that can explain what has happened to her."

"There has been foul play," Michael added, looking toward my friends, "obviously not on your part. It is clear that we know our friend; we have spent many years with her. We're just trying to get her back to her former state."

"She was told she would be safe here," Madelynnne replied calmly, unruffled by their demands, "meaning she was unsafe where she was previously."

"She was not unsafe in Salem," Brenda insisted.

Thankfully, she wasn't convinced so easily. "I do not know that and neither does she."

"I was in danger somewhere," I added.

"She was told that she would be safe here," Madelynnne repeated.

"Birthmark," Jason said suddenly. "You have a birthmark."

I looked up at Petor. "Do I have a birthmark?" I hadn't seen one, but then again I hadn't thought to look either.

He flushed nearly scarlet. "I do not know."

"I apologize for putting you on the spot," Jason told me, "but you do have a birthmark on your back, near your left shoulder blade, shaped like a cross."

I reached up and pulled the collar of my shirt a little away from my neck. "Would you check?" I asked Petor.

His fingers were warm against my skin as he searched for the mark. "There's something here."

"What is it?"

He tugged on the shirt a little more. "It's a scar."

"What kind of scar?" I asked.

"Burn scar," he replied, letting his hands fall away.

I reached back to feel for myself and sure enough I found the rough texture of a scar near my left shoulder blade. Someone had taken great pains to either hide Christina Kline or to conceal any evidence that I was not she. I knew which one I wanted to believe, and while I doubted they would agree, I had to say it.

"Sorry, it's a scar," I told them coolly. "I must not be her. Maybe this guy that you said has this bloodline that makes you forget, maybe he killed the real Christina and I just look like her and he embraced me and that's why I can't remember anything."

Brenda wasn't buying it at all, which didn't surprise me. She stared at me, sadness and disbelief mingled in her eyes. "Are you beyond entertaining the notion that you're Christina Kline?"

I looked at each of them in turn, searching my mind for some spark of memory, but there was nothing, absolutely nothing. They meant nothing to me and the least I could do was be honest about it. "Look I don't know you people, okay?"

"You've lost your memory," Michael reminded me not unkindly. "Pardon me for sounding crude, but, duh. We know you, but you have obviously lost your memory. We have to find it."

I didn't like the zeal in his voice. He seemed dead set on me remembering whatever it was I had forgotten whether I wanted to or not. Without realizing it, I inched even closer to Scott, and the touch of his arm against mine made me feel a little safer.

"I don't-I don't know what to think," I told the strangers across from me. "I don't remember any of you and I know that wherever I was I wasn't safe. If you really are from where I came from, how do I know that I'm going to be safe with you?"

"Why don't you use your aura perception to read our auras and then tell us?" Brenda suggested.

The images I'd seen around Casilde came to mind, and I looked away to hide the knowledge from Brenda. It seemed more than likely now that I actually had been using Auspex when I'd seen those things around the werecat. I turned to Madelynne hoping she could offer another explanation, but she only smiled reassuringly at me. It helped.

"You manipulate the blood," Brenda told me, then proceeded to explain what it was I should look for in the air around them.

Her words didn't mean much to me, but I did my best to follow her directions. I wasn't really surprised to see some kind of light surrounding her being like a halo. It had to be the aura she spoke of, but it wasn't like what I'd seen around Casilde a few nights ago. For one thing, this light was very pale. For another, there were no colors.

"Why don't you try looking at him?" she recommended, gesturing to the man on her left.

I looked at Jason, but I found nothing in the air around him. The only thing I could see was his beautiful hazel eyes. "He's pretty," I offered with a shrug.

From the way everyone began staring at me, I knew that was exactly the wrong thing to say. I'd hoped to hide my attraction to the man, but they seemed more than pleased about it. I knew I had to be more careful or I'd find myself on a plane to Salem before I could whistle Dixie.

## What If

How do you expect I will know what to do  
When all I know is what you tell me to?  
Linkin Park - By Myself

"We'd like you to come home to Salem with us," Jason offered. "If you wish to bring your people with you to see your original surroundings, that is fine."

As tempting as the thought of spending time with him was, there was no way they were getting me to Salem. I could feel Petor's warm presence behind me and the burden of his trust was almost too much to bear. My safety wasn't as much of a concern; I was Kindred after all, and harder to get rid of. Although I couldn't remember the circumstances, I knew that when I'd ghouled Petor I'd vowed to keep him from harm.

In my mind these people were still dangerous to me, and I wasn't putting him or any of the pack in danger if I could help it. They might tell me I was safe in Salem, hell, they might even believe it themselves, but they could never convince me. The only way they would get me to Massachusetts would be to stake me first.

"I don't think that we should drag these people half way across the country," I said firmly. "There has to be some other way to resolve this."

"You would like to have your memory back, correct?" Michael asked me.

I wasn't so sure about that. "I don't know."

"Even if it's a bad memory, it's best to at least know what you are looking out for," he told me. "If something bad is after you—"

"But it protects me," I interrupted. I wasn't sure if I deep down I knew it to be true, or simply wanted it to be.

"From what?" Jason asked softly.

"Ignorance may be bliss but it is not safety, my dear Tina," Michael replied.

"She is safe with us," Madelynne insisted.

"And you know, I think I can take care of myself," I told them firmly. If the sheer number of my weapons were any indication, I could.

"If you were taken from the safety of your own house," Brenda reminded me skeptically, "of your own bedroom..."

"Of course you don't know that," Michael added patronizingly, "but you were found unconscious and unable to fend for yourself."

There was no way to reply to that argument. I had been a little out of it when Madelynne had pulled up, but Petor had been there to watch over and protect me. Still, I wasn't going to tell them that, they already disliked my servant and I didn't want to draw attention to him again.

To buy myself a little time to think I lifted my hand and looked down at the ring beneath my palm. It was a man's ring, and it looked very familiar to me. Suddenly I realized why. It took a moment to untangle the necklace I wanted beneath my shirt, but it was worth the effort. The ring Jason had been wearing was identical to the man's ring I wore around my neck. They both matched

the woman's wedding set perfectly. In fact, other than a few wear marks, the men's bands were identical.

I stared at the rings trying to remember something, anything about this man or my past. There was nothing. Anger filled me at the reminder of the black hole that was my memory and I tucked my necklace back under my shirt.

"I apologize, I did not fully catch your name," Jason said to Madelynn before looking back at me. "But your new friend, if she disappeared and lost her memory and didn't remember you, wouldn't you be doing everything to help her regain her memory if she did not trust you?"

He was being logical I didn't like his brand of hardball. "Not if she didn't want it," I said stubbornly.

"You can't force something up on someone if they don't want it," Madelynn added.

"That is not true," he said sternly.

"What do you mean?" she demanded. "If she does not want to remember, would you force it upon her?"

"No, I meant that something was forced upon me when I was human," he corrected, obviously upset. "I did not choose this life."

"Countess," Brenda said respectfully, "do you know of any ritual, anything that can help resolve this?"

"There are rituals available," she replied slowly, "but if this was not done by a Thaumaturge, the results are likely to be less than successful. If this was done by a mage as you say, it would take another of that kind to reverse any possible effects."

"Is there anyone in the area that could help with this?" Brenda asked.

She shook her head. "Not that is skilled with matters of the mind."

My 'sister' turned back to me. "If we could find someone who has the ability, would you try?"

I didn't want to try. I didn't fully understand it, but there it was. If what they said was true there didn't seem to be anything in my past I couldn't regain with a little time spent getting to know these strangers. There was only one reason I could think of to want to remember what it was they kept telling me I'd lost.

"If only to know what I'm not safe from," I reluctantly agreed. "Even if it is you," I added pointedly, looking at each of them in turn.

"I can guarantee it's not us," she replied, meeting my eye without flinching.

"Being one who has been under the fire and chains of the Sabbat," Michael said softly. "It is better to know your enemies than to be blinded by it. Don't be a fool, dear Tina."

"And if it does not work?" Madelynn demanded.

"Then she has lost nothing in the trying," Brenda answered calmly.

Michael shook his head sadly. "Then she will spend the rest of eternity—"

"As a vegetable," Logan cut in, speaking for the first time.

"With the Gangrel," Michael corrected, looking impatiently at me. "Then let your history start today. I'm growing tired of this back and forth. It is frustrating to see a friend in such dire straights."

I was growing tired of his dramatics. "If I am such a good friend, shouldn't you have a little more patience with me?"

He smiled a little. "It is not one of my merits."

"What if there are bad side effects of this ritual?" Madelynne asked.

"I'm sure that would be known before hand," she replied.

"Death?" Madelynne demanded harshly. "Do you want her dead?"

"She's dead already," Michael answered with a dry laugh. "We're all dead."

She shook her head. "Let me rephrase. If she is who you say she is, do you want her out of your life for good?"

"She is out of our life for good," Brenda replied irritably. "She doesn't remember us; she basically wants nothing to do with us. What the hell do you think we're going to do at this point?"

Once again they were talking about me like I wasn't there. "Okay, you invade my mind and you wonder why I don't want to have anything to do with you?" I said with no little irritation of my own.

"It's not an invasion," she denied with a confused frown.

"It is if I don't know what's going on," I told her bluntly.

"If it's to help you?" she asked, apparently astonished that I would think so badly of her.

Jason leaned forward to get my attention. "In order for that ability to even work, it must be originally taught between each other and agreed upon. If she can speak into your mind, you must have been friends in the past."

Even without remembering my past I knew he was wrong, if not straight out lying. I turned to the countess. "Is it possible to speak to another person's mind without their permission, knowledge and or pretraining?"

Yes, I heard her reply in my mind.

I couldn't keep the satisfied look on my face as I turned back to Jason. "Do I know her too?"

"I know it is in the interest of at least the Ventrue to care for the Camarilla and all of its members," Michael interjected, "and having one of us running around half cocked with half a memory would not do any good. I believe it would be in the best interest for all of us to try and help you regain your memories, even if it's not of us. Perhaps I won't be long away from sunny California."

"You see the sun frequently then, I take it?" Madelynne asked dryly, apparently as tired of his posturing as I was.

"I'm not afraid of it," he replied calmly.

Something in his face said that he'd faced worse things than sunlight and survived. Brenda seemed particularly affected by his reply. She sat back and stared at him with a mixture of amazement and shock on her face.

"Sweetheart," Michael said to Madelynne.

"My name is not sweetheart," she shot back irritably.

"I've been staked, buried, burned, shot, stabbed and forgotten." At that he gave a sidelong look at Brenda before turning back to my friend. "I'm sure that I can survive the loss of yet another dear

friend, although I don't agree with it." He turned and looked at my 'husband'. "Jason, I feel for your loss, but sometimes it is better to move on."

"I can't give up on her," he said firmly. "She's the one that spent how many months finding me?"

Michael waved a hand dismissively. "She can't remember that now."

"No, but it's there somewhere," he insisted.

Madelynne turned to me. "If you choose to do this, I will stand behind you," she told me. "But make sure that you want to do this and that you don't do this out of guilt."

"What do I have to be guilty for?" I replied firmly. "I don't know these people. I have no reason to feel guilty."

She nodded in agreement. "Don't let them guilt you into it by saying these things."

I wouldn't let that happen. I knew I had to weigh the consequences of whatever ritual they might find, when and if they came up with one, and decide for myself if it were worth the risks. "I can't say that I'm going to do some ritual that they haven't even found that could brain fry me, but—"

I stopped and looked at Jason for a moment. Whatever it was that drew me to him was like an invisible cord in my mind that wouldn't let go. Somehow I felt that if he entered a room from behind me I would know he was there. How could I turn away from the attraction without finding out if it were genuine?

"I suppose I could try to get know them and see if it sparks any memories," I offered quietly.

"Do you still have your wedding gift?" Jason asked.

I held up my left hand, bare of rings. "I'm not married," I insisted.

He gestured toward my shirt where I'd hidden my necklaces. "What of the rings?"

"I have a matched set," I replied dryly.

Brenda leaned forward a bit. "Look at his ring and tell me what you see."

I glanced down, but there was nothing there I hadn't already seen. It was beautiful, with a leafed design that I found pleasing. "A ring."

"Look at it," she insisted.

It was no good, the memory sparked no memories or visions in my mind. "I see nothing," I told her, sliding the ring back across the table.

Jason caught it and put it back on before reaching up to take off a necklace. He placed it on top of the photo album that had been sitting in front of Brenda and slid them both across the table. A part of me wanted to open the album, to see if Christina had experienced happier times with these people, but I forced myself to keep my hands on the table.

"We have shown her artifacts from her past that would have jarred the most stubborn of memories," Michael stated, obviously on the beginning of another rant.

"An artifact," I interrupted.

"Well, let's find out if this one clicks," Jason pleaded.

Against my better judgment, I reached out and picked up the locket. It seemed an odd thing for a man to wear, gold and heart shaped, but he had taken it off only a moment ago. Carefully I opened it to reveal the pictures inside.

The miniature on the left was of Jason. He wasn't quite smiling, but there was joy evident on his face. He was half turned toward the camera with an intense look in his eye that told me his wife must have taken the picture.

Even though Brenda had shown me visions of the woman she claimed was her sister, I was shocked when I looked down at my face in right half of the locket. "It looks like me," I breathed. The woman was also smiling at the camera in such a way that revealed she loved the man who had captured the image.

"By God, woman," Michael exclaimed. "It is you. It couldn't be any more you. There is only one Christina Kline. You are the same beautiful friend that we have lost."

I sat there holding the locket staring down into the faces, half of me hoping that I really was the woman who looked so much in love, the other half hoping they were all wrong. There was nothing of memories in my mind to confirm or refute their claim, not even a remnant of a memory.

Suddenly a flash of light filled my mind while I stared at the locket sending fear shooting down my spine. I dropped it to the table and jerked backward to get as far away from it as possible. I felt the weight of everyone's eyes on me, but I could only stare at the locket with a hand to my temple. I expected to feel the pain of a headache, and was more than a little surprised when I did not.

"Are you okay?" Madelynne asked.

"Yeah," I murmured. "It was like a flash of light, and it freaked me out."

"Try again, please," Jason implored.

"I don't know if I would touch it again," she advised me softly.

I wanted to agree with her, but the flash had frightened me more than anything, I'd gotten no pain from touching the locket. Still, I didn't want to go through the disturbing experience again. Jason was looking at me imploringly, and I had to tear my eyes away from the heartbreaking look on his face. It took all I had to turn away.

"I don't think so," I replied, looking to Madelynne for support.

"We've not magicked the locket," Michael told us.

"Maybe," I murmured, trying not to look across the table at Jason. "Maybe later."

"In the name of Caine, woman," Michael insisted. "Grab it and hold it."

I glanced at Madelynne, but couldn't keep my eyes from going back to Jason. His gaze pleaded with me, begged me to just try one more time. I shook my head at my own stupidity as I reached for the locket again.

This time as I sat gazing at the locket, I saw an image of myself holding the locket only a moment ago. Then the vision changed to show Jason taking it off as he had before he'd sent it across the table. When no memories or other images came to me I carefully sat the locket back on the photo album as I told them what I had seen.

Brenda seemed pleased. "Do you have something that came with you when you awoke?"

I couldn't stop myself from glancing over my shoulder at Petor.

"Something perhaps besides the puppy," she murmured so softly I almost didn't hear her.

Before I could stop the movement, my hands went to where my guns should have been. "I don't have my weapons," I whispered, feeling a little lost without them.

"Ah, since there's no weapons allowed in here," Brenda replied coolly.

"No, but she can do it when she gets them back," Jason put in.

"I have my necklaces," I told them, my hand going to the front of my shirt.

Brenda leaned forward a bit. "What about Graves' cross?"

I frowned. "A cross from a grave?"

"No," Jason said with an encouraging smile. "Talon's cross. It's big, and it opens."

"There's blood in it," Brenda added, "infused."

The countess sat forward a little in her chair, suddenly interested in our conversation.

It took a moment to separate the necklaces, but eventually I pulled out the largest cross I was wearing and held it out. "This one?" I asked as Jason hid his face once more and Brenda nodded. "Do what with it?"

"Hold it and concentrate," she told me.

"It has a latch," Jason said from behind his hand.

Brenda looked at me searchingly. "Haven't you opened it?"

I looked down at the cross, but could see no sign of an opening or hinges. "It opens?"

"Hit the latch," she instructed. "It's on the right hand side."

I glanced at Scott who was also looking at the cross. "What the hell are they talking about?"

He shrugged, apparently no more able to see what they were talking about than I was.

"Can you open it?" Brenda asked.

I shook my head. "I guess I don't see what you're saying."

She held her hand out. "May I?"

There was no way I was going to take the necklace off, but apparently Giles didn't know that. He was on his way to my side when Brenda stood up.

"May I come around?" she asked, gesturing toward the Tremere end of the table.

I stood and went to meet her half way, behind the Countess. Close up Brenda was even prettier, if that were possible. She looked into my eyes for a long moment before reaching out and touching a spot on the cross.

"Right there," she told me, pulling her hand away slowly.

After she'd pointed it out, the latch was obvious. I touched the spot and the cross fell open in my hands. On the inside were fifteen small glowing objects that whirled hypnotically in shades of red.

"What are the little red glowing things?" I asked, caught in the play of light in the crystal-like orbs.

"They are infused blood," she told me. "It is a Tremere ability to infuse blood into objects so you can store it and use it later when you need it."

That sounded very handy, especially in emergencies. "Really?"

"The cross was a gift to you from Jason," she added softly.

I glanced over to see him looking the other way. "The one that's hiding from it," I murmured doubtfully.

"When he was embraced he could not handle it any more," she replied sadly.

At her words, as Jason pulled the front of his shirt down a little to reveal a cross shaped burn scar on his chest. The scar was a bad one, but somehow it didn't detract from the attractiveness of his muscular chest.

When I realized I was straining for a better look at his skin, I closed the cross and cupped it in my hands, trying very hard to concentrate on it and not Jason. It wasn't any good, all I could do was wonder what his body would feel like beneath my fingers, what his skin would taste like.

Impatiently I tucked the cross back into my shirt and strode back to my chair. I could barely take my eyes off Jason as I tried to figure out what it was about him that fired my obsession.

Michael leaned toward me to get a better look at my face as I sat down, but he must not have liked what he saw. "She's had the biggest kick in the ass to her memory that we can deliver. Any further attempt this evening would be pushing it," he told the prince.

Frasier leaned forward and whispered something I didn't catch into Jason's ear. My 'husband' didn't seem to like whatever it was, but the human seemed insistent. Finally Jason turned his beautiful eyes to me once more.

"Would you be willing to," he began hesitantly with a glance around the room, "with some of the body guards, to speak one on one?"

I lifted an eyebrow at his audacity. "With who?"

"With me," he replied. "With none from my side, only the bodyguards that the prince has posted. They're big, they're hairy, I don't think they'd have a problem tearing me apart if I tried something, and I'm not going to."

He seemed sincere enough, but then again they all had. I looked at Madelynne for her opinion.

"How do you feel?" she asked softly.

"Confused," I admitted. I studied his face for a long moment, but in the end I knew I had no choice. I had to talk to him alone to find out what the hold he had over me was. "Okay."

He turned to the Frenchman. "My prince, is there a room and may we borrow a few of your, I would say, stronger guards so that she may feel safe?"

"There is the hallway," the prince suggested. "Fred will go with you."

I stood and walked toward the closer end of the table. As I drew even with her, Madelynne warned me to be careful. I had every intention of heeding her advice. Before I could get around the table, Michael leaned across Brenda to talk to Jason. I didn't quite hear their conversation, but apparently this time Jason wasn't taking anyone's advice.

By the time I drew even with him, Jason had moved back far enough from the door that I didn't feel like he was crowding me. Fred opened the door to the hall and stood waiting patiently for us to go through.

## *Opposites Distract*

Oh your gaze is dangerous  
And you fill your space so sweet  
Fiona Apple - Shadowboxer

I preceded them into hall, not really sure I was doing the right thing. I wasn't sure I should be taking the chance of being alone with Jason, but then again it was more than likely that Fred could take care of anything that might go wrong. I walked a few feet down the hall and stood with my arms over my chest, trying to brace myself for the assault, mental or physical, I felt would be coming.

Jason surprised me. He walked over to the top of the steps and slowly sat down, watching me as he did so. I think he knew I was frightened and was being careful not to startle me, but it didn't help my state of mind.

"Okay," he said softly, "what is the first thing you remember?"

I knew the only way to get to the bottom of this whole mess was to be honest with him. "Laying on the pavement and it raining," I told him, seeing the road again in my mind's eye. "Looking up and seeing Petor and the headlights."

"Did you trust Petor when you first saw him?"

"He's my ghoul." I had no reason not to trust him.

"How do you know he's your ghoul?" he asked calmly and reasonably. "Did he tell you that?"

"No," I said quickly, hoping Jason didn't think me stupid enough to fall for something like that. "No, I knew it. I know my name is Tina, I know his name is Petor, and I know he's my ghoul and I can trust him."

He nodded, accepting my answer without argument. "You were referred to as Tina by your father," he told me. "We have always called you Christina or Chris. I wish there were something I could think of..." His voice trailed off and his face was filled with such a look of sadness and longing that I just wanted to take him in my arms and comfort him. "I wish there was a way I could get you to trust me again," he said softly, with such sincerity that I knew he was telling me the truth.

"I believe you." I let my arms fall to my sides and took a step closer to him.

"You followed me," he told me softly, his voice pleading for me to remember. "There were times when I should have been there for you, and I am sorry. I am trying to be here for you now. I know you'd do the same for me."

I couldn't resist the lost look in his eye. I was drawn closer to him, and soon I found myself sitting down beside him on the top step. I looked into his eyes and for a moment was lost in the green and brown that swirled in their depths.

This close he was even more devastatingly handsome. He looked at me as if he'd been starving for the sight. Here on the steps we seemed the same height, although I knew he was several inches taller than me. The broad shoulders beneath his shirt looked strong enough for me to rest all of my worries on. His strong arms would hold back the world and take care of me forever.

The lines of his face weren't classically handsome, but they were very pleasing to the eye. His lips were perfect, arching below a strong nose and clear hazel eyes. His chin was strong too, and the skin

of his neck was smooth despite a small scar near his collar. I'd never seen a more handsome man in all my life.

A lock of hair fell across his forehead and I wanted to push it back but I forced my hand to lay still in my lap. Somehow I knew I would be completely lost if I touched him. What I didn't know was how to explain my reaction to this man.

"We've been all over the planet." He stopped and laughed softly, the sound echoing pleasantly through me. "Actually we've been to other places."

I didn't know what to make of that statement. I wanted to ask, but his eyes distracted me.

"Is there any way I could talk, to get you to—" He stopped, searching for the right words. "If we paid for everything for you and your friends, to bring you back to your home, at least for a night—"

"I wasn't safe there," I stated calmly, not letting him finish. Nothing he could say would convince me to go to Salem.

"Do you feel safe among your friends?"

"Yes," I said honestly, "but I don't feel safe taking them into your territory." God only knew how many people they could count on, and I still didn't know their intentions. I wasn't putting the pack in danger for anyone, not even this charmingly handsome stranger.

"Would you—" He stopped himself again, then shook his head sadly. "I don't know. Other than the magic and the guns, I have nothing much else to convince you."

"Guns," I repeated, relieved for a topic I knew something about. "The ones with the symbols."

"Yes, with your clan and my clan engraved," he agreed.

"You're Tremere?" He really hadn't looked it to me, I'd have guessed Gangrel.

"No, I am Gangrel," he reminded me with a patient smile. "You are Tremere. They were given to us as a gift by Cormac."

"The really rude guy on the phone." I remembered him quite clearly. "I talked to him."

"He can be," Jason admitted. "He does have a heart, a fairly large one, but he can be a bit abrasive."

So could an orbital sander, but this conversation wasn't about Cormac. It was about Jason and I, or rather, his Christina. A part of me wished that I could remember being the woman he was looking for. I couldn't imagine what it would be like to be loved the way he obviously loved her.

I took a deep breath and looked down at my hands for a long moment before turning back to him. "Look, I can see that you obviously care for Christina a great deal," I admitted softly, "and it's clear that you want your wife back, but I don't remember you."

"Would you be willing to try to find out?" he asked pleadingly. "If you are who we say you are it's very important to get your memory back."

"I don't know what to believe," I whispered honestly.

"By going through this and restoring old memories, you have a chance at getting your memories back even if you are not Christina," he reminded me. "At least you would remember where you are from and who your friends were, even if you are not my wife, which I believe you are. Living in darkness is not something that is fun, believe me, I've done it."

There was a tone to his voice that told me there had been a point in his life when he had lost all hope. I didn't know what I would do if that happened to me. Despair could be a very deep hole to climb out of alone.

Abruptly I realized that his charm was winding its way into my heart. Whether it was his soft voice, his gentle eyes, or the sincerity behind what he was saying, I was losing control of myself too quickly. I had to find some way out of the web his words were wrapping around me.

"Look, you're..." How could I hope to describe this man without admitting the feelings rushing through me? I settled for the first word that came to mind. "Pretty. And you know, maybe I am who you say I am, but I just...."

It was hard for me admit my fears to this stranger, but in some ways it was so easy, too easy. "I don't remember," I continued hesitantly, "and I need some time to figure out what's going on. And, okay what if there's this ritual that if it doesn't work turns me into a zombie? Are there zombies?"

"Yes, but those are from the dark arts," he replied softly.

"Well, what if it's the dark arts that they're trying to do?" I demanded, fear rising inside of me.

He broke in with his soothing voice. "Chris, if there is... I understand what you're going through," he assured me. "If the thing that is making you believe that we are either not good for you or that you were in danger—"

"The thing that's making me believe that is the four guns that I had and the big knife," I told him bluntly. "If I were safe, I wouldn't be carrying an arsenal on my person." I refused to believe I'd been doing something illegal, and safety was the only other explanation.

"You're part of security," he answered firmly.

"I can believe that," I murmured. Hell, I'd moved right into security for the pack, hadn't I?

"You were part of the prince's enforcers," he added.

That too made some kind of sense. Working for a prince was dangerous business and only a fool would go less than fully armed, but it still didn't totally connect with everything I knew.

"But what about him saying I would be safe in Detroit?" I asked, still confused. "That infers that I wouldn't be safe where I was." If I had been in Salem as they said, that could mean that they weren't safe for me either.

"If it were me that found you and you didn't know who you were," he said reasonably, "I could take you in and tell you that you were safe anywhere. I mean, yes, he took you in and said you would be safe in Detroit, and—"

"Petor, wasn't—"

"—trust me, Detroit seems pretty well locked down," he continued with a smile. "Who all do you remember, other than the people who are here, and Mr. Bare Chest?"

"Bare chest?" I repeated slowly. The only one in the room with a bare chest had been Scott. He never could seem to get his shirts buttoned properly.

The heated look Jason shot me burned with jealousy. For a moment I saw it from his point of view, the woman he believed was his wife sitting that close to another man, touching him casually as I had been touching Scott. Perhaps if Brenda hadn't told me that I was married Jason might have had something to be jealous about. Scott was attractive and there was something about him that

drew me to him, but I hadn't wanted that kind of complication if I really did have a husband somewhere.

"Scott?" I murmured, trying to downplay my pack mate's roll in the situation. "Scott is like... he's Scott." There was really no way to explain what he was to the pack, so I didn't even try. The best thing for me to do was change the subject, so I did.

"I know this is a strange question," I told Jason, "but there's this really weird sensation thing like coming from you and the guy that was sitting next to you." It was a long shot, but maybe he had an explanation for it.

"Sitting next to me here?" he asked, pointing to his left.

"You know, tall, dark, blue eyes," I reminded him. "Kind of good looking."

"Frasier? He is also your ghoul."

"Really?" It seemed too much that I had a husband this good looking and a ghoul who looked at me the way Frasier did. Remembering that look I wondered if we had been lovers. Glancing at Jason I realized that he would never have allowed it.

"Do you remember talon?" he asked abruptly.

"Talons?" I wasn't sure what he was talking about. The only talons I remembered were the ones on my hands when I woke up here in Detroit.

"Talon Graves," he replied. "Gangrel."

The name wasn't the least bit familiar. "Why would they name someone for the places of the dead?"

"It's his last name," he told me, searching my face for some kind of reaction that I apparently didn't know how to give him. "Low generation Gangrel."

It meant nothing to me. "Lots of claws?"

"You don't like him," he murmured, seeming a little disappointed. "At least you didn't. Who else can I think of? Elvira."

"Elvira." I recognized the name from my conversation with Cormac. "She was, um, she's pissed cause I'm not there."

"She is the prince," he said with a smile.

"She's pissed, 'cause I'm not there, I'm missing." I caught my error and tried to correct it. "Or Christina's missing."

"You said 'I'," he murmured with a smile, placing his hand on the steps between us, close to but not quite touching me.

I looked down at his hand and saw again the wedding ring he wore. I wanted to remember this man, I really did, but my memory was a darkened maze with no light to see by. I couldn't remember him, but I did still feel the pull of something about him, although as hard as I tried, I couldn't put my finger on what it was.

"Is there any—" He stopped and looked at me sadly, love shining in his deep hazel eyes. "I don't know what else to do."

"I don't know," I whispered. Odds were that I was his wife, but I didn't remember him or the danger I'd been in. I couldn't just surrender to the feelings I had for this man when it was possible that I'd been running from him. "I guess all I can ask is that you give me time to remember."

"You gave me two years," he murmured.

I looked up in surprise. "What did I give you two years for?"

He smiled sadly, and I had to turn away from the pain on his face. "As bad as it sounds, I was turned by the Crone, Lord Chaos—"

My head shot up at the word. "Chaos?"

"Lord Chaos," he repeated. "Yes, Mr. Big Bad Mage."

"He's a vampire?" Petor hadn't mentioned that fact, but perhaps he hadn't known or remembered.

"No, I think he's a wizard or mage of some sort," he told me. "He hired someone right after he kidnapped me. He kidnapped Lena—"

"Why would he tell Petor I would be safe in Detroit?" I asked, confused.

A low noise began in Jason's throat that quickly escalated to a loud growl. Fear shot through me, and I stumbled to my feet. Fred left his position by the door and walked menacingly toward us, watching every move Jason made.

"Um, I think it's time to go back in now," I said quickly, frightened by the barely leashed violence in the man I'd been so tempted to trust only a moment ago.

## *A Little Faith*

Hard to find how I feel  
Especially when you're smothering me  
Greed - Godsmack

Jason's aggressive behavior was quickly overcoming the attraction I felt for him. It was one thing to desire his body almost the way I craved blood, quite another to allow that desire to override my common sense. Perhaps he was the reason I'd left Salem after all.

"I'm okay, Fred," Jason said tensely as I fumbled for the doorknob.

I hurried through the door and made my way quickly around the table. Madelynne took one look at my face and quickly came to her feet.

"Are you okay?" she asked as I reached her.

I nodded warily, glancing at the door. "Yeah, he's just growling." I glanced at Petor but he seemed no worse for my absence. As Madeline and I sat down, Jason came back into the room. He still looked very upset, but at least he wasn't growling. Without thinking, I moved a little closer to Scott, longing for my weapons but determined that I wouldn't let Christina's husband hurt me without a fight, even if it were only by tooth and claw.

Jason walked over to stand behind his chair and look down at Brenda. "I-it-it was him," he stuttered.

I'm sure if Brenda could have, she'd have gone white. As it was her face went as still as death.

Michael stood, a look of disdain on his face. "It is obvious that we're getting nowhere here."

Brenda put a stop to his tirade by laying a hand on his arm. "Wait," she said softly.

"She did remember the Crone," Jason told him.

"She remembers Malcolm," Brenda announced.

"I don't remember anyone!" I refused to let them think I did.

"Lord Chaos," Jason replied, rage coloring his voice.

It was wicked obvious that they considered Chaos their enemy. That fact alone confirmed my distrust of them. After all, Chaos had sent Petor and I to Detroit where he felt we'd be safe. Either they were lying about the evil things they blamed on my protector, or someone had been feeding them a load of shit. Perhaps I should have kept my mouth shut, but I couldn't let them think so badly of someone I believed was trying to protect me.

"No," I said loudly to get their attention. "Petor said that Chaos told him to take care of me."

Suddenly everyone on the Salem side of the table looked at Petor with suspicion and loathing in their eyes. I think if they had been armed, Jason and Brenda would have killed my ghoul on the spot.

"This wasn't mentioned?" Michael exclaimed angrily, jumping to his feet and glaring at the man behind me. "And why have you not mentioned this, Petor?" he demanded. "We're working so hard to help—"

I stood so quickly that Petor had to catch my chair before it fell against his legs. My movement brought me into direct eye contact with Michael. "If you want to speak with him, you will speak to me," I shot back angrily. I wasn't going to let them hurt Petor, not even with harsh words.

Michael froze for half a moment as if considering the force of my anger. I met his eye without flinching, knowing that Petor was my responsibility. I was not afraid to protect him with my life and I made sure that Michael knew it.

After a moment he turned to the Frenchman. "Dear prince, this is an outrage," he said firmly. "This is information that has been kept from us."

I rolled my eyes at his 'outrage'. The information had been kept from them because no one had bothered to ask. Hell, it wasn't their business anyway. "Oh, sit down and shut up," I told him irritably.

He ignored me. "We are all wasting the prince's time as well as the countess' and all these kind people," he began, showing every sign of going off on another of his butt kissing rants.

It broke my temper. "I don't need this crap from him," I said loudly. Realizing how that must have sounded, I turned toward the head of the table. "I'm sorry, my prince," I murmured.

Brenda laid a hand on her companion's arm once more. Her very touch seemed to give him a start. "Michael, a moment. Wait."

Between her voice and the quelling look the prince gave him, Michael was able to calm himself. He sat down slowly, as did Jason and Frasier.

I, on the other hand, kept my feet. "You all are acting like he had something to do with this," I said sternly, giving the Salem crew the full weight of my disapproving stare. "He had nothing to do with it."

"That who had something to do with it?" Brenda asked calmly.

"Petor," I exclaimed angrily. "He's going off on Petor. You know, Petor is my ghoul and he's blood bound to me," I stated bluntly. "Can any of the rest of you say that?"

Brenda and Jason both pointed to Frasier as he half stood and raised his hand, a sheepish grin on his face.

"He can," Jason said confidently. "Like I told you in the hallway."

Michael turned to the Tremere at the end of the table. "Dear countess," he said formally, "is there a way through Thaumaturgy that we can prove the blood bond between these two? That would solve a lot."

"Her blood is in him," Jason insisted, which made me wonder how often he watched Frasier drink Christina's blood.

"Yes there is," the countess replied to Michael.

He didn't seem surprised. "Well, my lady, I believe that would solve this mystery."

"At least part of it," she said with a small nod.

"How else would the blood mingle so freely between them?" Michael demanded, looking at me.

I wasn't paying attention, I was looking at Madeline to see if she knew anything about the ritual they were talking about.

"I don't know," she said softly.

Brenda cleared her throat. "Countess, as you are a neutral third party, do you think that you could help us? Would you do the Blood Walk?"

Jason seemed a little too excited over the idea. "You could state the lineage, and it would prove who she is. Think about it, you could match what was done in Salem before."

"The Blood Walk would solve this problem," Michael insisted.

Brenda nodded her agreement. "It would help legitimize our claim."

Madeline caught my attention. "Is this something you'd like to do?"

"I'd like to know what it is first," I replied. Perhaps if I knew what the ritual was I could decide if I wanted it done as badly as they seemed to. I looked at the countess. "What is this Blood Walk?"

"It is a ritual that requires a unit of your blood and three hours," she explained. "It will reveal your generation and any blood bonds you may have."

"Blood bonds to me and that I have to others?"

"Yes, both regent and thrall," she confirmed.

Which meant the ritual would reveal if the attraction I felt toward Jason was the result of a blood bond. I glanced at Madelynn, and she nodded almost imperceptibly. I was glad she agreed without knowing the paths my mind was taking.

"Is this something that you would agree to perform?" I asked of the countess.

"Yes, if it is needed," she agreed, studying my face. "Is there really any doubt that these two gentlemen are blood bound to you?"

I looked pointedly at Frasier. "I don't know this one." I didn't add that I hoped proving Petor's bond to me would help ease their animosity toward him.

She shrugged delicately. "If we wish to take the time."

Once again, Michael spoke up. "Countess, I believe it is well worth the time, even in Tina's best interest if she is not Christina, to put the issue to rest." He smiled calmly, obviously satisfied with the events he'd brought to bear. "In the interest of peace."

I wasn't buying his contented act. "Because if I am who you say I am, he's blood bound to me," I said softly. "But if he's not I'm not."

"Correct," Jason replied, smiling.

"And that right there from what we know will prove you to be either Christina or Tina," Michael told me. "If we have made a mistake then the Blood Walk will prove it one way or the other."

"It will also tell who your sire is," Brenda interjected.

"Would you agree to this, Miss Andrews?" the countess asked.

I didn't want to sound as enthusiastic as the others, but I did want the ritual done just as badly. Without this Blood Walk they spoke of, I would always wonder if I was the woman they claimed me to be. "Yes, I would agree to it."

"Very good."

After a moment, one of the bodyguards reached behind the bar and retrieved a pitcher, which he sat on the table near the countess. I could hear Brenda and Jason whispering together as I got up and walked toward the Tremere Elder, but I couldn't hear what they said. Not that it mattered, they'd asked for this ritual. If it proved them wrong they had no one to blame but themselves.

When I reached the countess' side Missy moved a little to give me better access to the pitcher. I took the leather jacket off my right arm and let it hang behind me before dropping my fangs and biting into my wrist. I tore a hole big enough for the blood to flow freely and held it over the rim of the pitcher.

It took a few minutes for the vitae to fill the container. Standing bleeding next to a Tremere was not my idea of a good time, but I tried not to let my unease show. I let my gaze fall on Brenda, and her eyes never shied away from mine as my blood fell into the pitcher. It was nearly to the top when the countess told me it was enough.

Hunger burned inside of me but I knew I could wait a night or so before feeding. I looked speculatively at Frasier and wondered when I'd fed from him last. If he was my ghoul, I was fully within my rights to feed from him tonight.

The countess stood and, taking the pitcher of blood, made her way to one of the side tables with Zach and Missy at her side. I returned to my chair, but didn't sit down. I laid a hand on Petor's arm and smiled reassuringly at him. He put his hand over mine and nodded, telling me without words that he was fine.

Glancing down at the table, I noticed that the photo album Brenda had entered with was still in front of my chair. I studied it for a moment, noting that the fabric cover was a little worn on the edges as if the album had been frequently handled.

I looked questioningly at Brenda, but she just smiled and gestured encouragingly toward the album. The room was quiet except for the soft chanting coming from the corner, and I could feel all eyes on me as I opened the book.

Smiling up at me from the very first page was Jason and his Christina. The photo was similar to the one the prince had shown me, but not exactly the same. She looked happy to be in her husband's arms, and he seemed more than strong enough to care for her. As hard as I tried, I couldn't remember anything about the day they had wed.

Turning the pages slowly, I studied each photo as I went. Many of the faces I recognized as those sitting across from me, or from visions that Brenda had shown me. The first few pages were of Jason and Christina's wedding, and there were many faces I didn't recognize. Brenda was able to fill in the names and their relationships to Christina, but none of them meant anything to me.

"Those are your wedding pictures," Brenda said softly.

"So you say," I replied absently.

Talon Graves had been Jason's best man. He was the prince of LA, and had once owned the large cross I was wearing. Daedelus, the Nosferatu Primogen from San Francisco, had stood up with Jason, as had Mikael Provinof. Mikael was involved with Lady Lena Stockton, one of Christina's bridesmaids.

"She helped you find Jason when he was abducted and forcibly embraced," Brenda explained. "She's mortal and lives in Austria. She is the woman that Malcolm abducted." I think she was a little disappointed when I didn't react to those words.

Nina Rodriguez was the second bride's maid. She was a Tremere from LA that I had apparently met through Cormac. Brenda, of course, was the maid of honor.

"Is there normally children at Kindred events?" I asked when I saw a photo of the flower girl who looked to be around ten years old.

"That is Lucy Reynolds," Brenda said distastefully. "She is an Assamite that resides in Flint, Michigan. She is the scourge there."

"That's not that far away," I murmured thoughtfully, turning the page.

Victoria Monroe was the woman I'd seen shopping with Brenda and Christina in the visions. Estrea Moreno was prominent in many of the photos, she was an old friend from San Francisco. The tall Spaniard that had spoken to my mind was also in many of the photos. Brenda gave his name as Antonio Miguel Santiago Moreno, but added that he was not actually related to Estrea.

I recognized Cormac Brennan from the visions Brenda had shown me, and in the photos Eliza Gentry was never far from his side. Brenda explained that Robert Strong was my mortal brother, that he was a mage who lived in Paris with my nephew, Owen.

Once I got past the wedding photos, there were many new people scattered among the ones I'd already seen. Idella was Antonio's girlfriend and the Tremere Primogen of Vegas. Corrine Mackenzie Wright was the mortal child of Cormac and Eliza. Dougal Galloway was the man Brenda claimed was Christina's sire. Lord Bruce Blackwell was Brenda's adopted child. There were also several photos of Jason that didn't look like him at all. Apparently Christina's husband was a master of disguise.

Brenda only stumbled over two of the photographs in the album. The first was a worn photo of Christina with three friends that was had been taken prior to her embrace. The second was of a tall man with long blond hair.

"That is Luke Thomas," she said coolly. Something in her voice said that she didn't like him one bit. "He is a Gangrel formerly of Los Angeles. We don't know where he is now."

I closed the photo album and stared down at it for a moment before looking up at Brenda. "You keep saying that these people are related to me in some fashion or another, but—"

"I know," she said gently, "you don't remember, right?"

I'd had enough of her tolerant tone. I put the locket on top of the album and slid them both across the table. "You ready to go downstairs?" I asked Madelynne as Jason put the locket back on. I didn't think I could sit in this room and stare at the others for three hours without going insane.

"Of course," she replied.

After a short conference with Alex to ask him to stay in the room, the rest of us went downstairs. Many of the security guards went too, but they didn't seem to actually be following us. The second floor of the bar had tables and a bar, but nearly a fourth of the floor was open over the dance area below. Madelynne led us downstairs where the band was playing.

"I have a little extra energy to get rid of," I said when we reached the edge of the dance floor. "Anyone care to dance?"

Scott was the only one to take me up on the suggestion. While we walked out onto the dance floor, Petor made his way to the bar. Madelynne and Logan stayed near the stairs for a few minutes, but eventually they joined us.

The music was loud, pounding even, and I loved the wild freedom of it. After a while I began to feel like someone was watching me, and when I turned toward the sensation, I found a vampire staring at me. The man stood out quite obviously in the crowd, and was staring rather intently at me. He was tall and bald, very muscular, and nicely dressed in an Armani suit. I danced closer to the others and asked if they knew him, but no one did.

"Another one from Salem?" Madelynne suggested.

"He wasn't in the photo album," I reminded her. "I haven't seen him in any of the visions."

"I'm sure there's a lot of people you know in Salem," she told me.

"If he is from Salem there's nothing he can do here," I replied, trying to remain calm. "We just have to be more careful."

## *Truth Be Told*

Now that I've seen  
Not really diggin' this  
Nickelback - Diggin' this

I glanced over to check on Petor and nearly freaked out when I realized that Frasier had taken the barstool next to him. I murmured a hasty apology to Madelynn and made my way across the dance floor to find out what was going on, with Scott following close behind.

When I reached the bar, I could see that Frasier and Petor had been talking for some time. There were several drained shot glasses lined up on the bar along with a number of empty popcorn bowls. Frasier had seen me approach but didn't say a word, he just looked me up and down as if to make sure I hadn't lost a limb since the last time I'd seen him.

Of course I looked him over just as thoroughly, though for a different reason. I knew that everyone entering the Sanctuary was searched for weapons, but I couldn't help but wonder if he'd somehow managed to hide something from the security team.

The closer I got, the more I felt the same unnatural vibe I'd gotten from him upstairs. It was very similar to the vibes Jason had given off, but this was definitely coming from Frasier. I glanced at Petor, but he seemed to be okay, although definitely more relaxed than he'd been when I'd entered the dance floor.

"What's going on," I asked, looking between the two of them.

"Just getting to know each other," Petor assured me, taking a drink from the glass in his hand.

I eyed the bartender warily as he opened a new bottle of vodka. "You might want to wait till we get home before drinking real heavy," I warned Petor. "There could be trouble."

I looked pointedly at Frasier to see how he would react to my comment, but he just smiled at me as if he could never do me harm. Of course, I didn't know if that were true, and I sure as hell didn't know him.

"So how come you're not up with the others?" I asked bluntly.

"Because I came to protect you," he replied.

"Really?" I said, not believing him for a moment. "From myself, my friends, or the people upstairs?"

He shrugged indifferently. "Whatever. It's what you hired me for."

"Does that mean that if you think I'm in danger and I think I'm not you're going to protect me anyway?" I demanded.

"I have before." He lifted his beer and downed half the glass in one swallow.

I didn't like the sounds of that. It seemed like everyone else thought they knew how to run my life, and I was having none of it. I leaned back a little to rest against Scott's hard chest. I knew he wouldn't let these strangers take me against my will.

After gesturing toward the bartender for a shot of vodka, I told Petor to move down a stool so I could sit between him and Frasier. The dark haired stranger seemed to like the idea of me sitting next to him, but I didn't let his enthusiasm bother me. Scott moved forward until I could feel his strong presence a handbreadth behind me.

"What are your plans when we get out of here?" I asked Frasier. "Are you guys planning on stakes and a truck to take me back to Salem?"

He gave me an even look. "I came to find you."

I put up my hands in a dramatic gesture. "Here I am. You can go home now."

"I came to protect you," he repeated fervently, "to make sure you're safe and to keep you that way."

I glanced over my shoulder at Scott. "I think I've got that one covered," I drawled with a smile.

"You brought me here, I am your ghoul," Frasier claimed.

"I didn't bring you to Detroit," I denied. Hell, I didn't remember bringing myself to Detroit.

"No, you brought me to this reality," he explained.

I stared at him in surprise. "Are you on drugs?"

"No." He didn't even seem drunk, and he was too calm to not be telling the truth.

"You're from another...?" Then I remembered that Jason had said something about that earlier. "How am I supposed to trust that you've got my best interest at heart and that you're going to do what I tell you to do?"

He grinned. "Try me."

"Yeah, like what?" I demanded.

"I'm blood bound to you," he said with a shrug.

Even if they all said it, that didn't make it true. "So you say."

"Try me," he repeated with a certain amount of attitude in his tone. It wasn't cocky, exactly, more self-assured than anything.

His lopsided grin made me want to trust him, but I wasn't sure I could. I studied him carefully, trying to find a sign that he was everything he claimed to be. After a moment I could see pale colors in the air around him. I didn't know for sure what the colors were, but I knew what they meant. I could trust Frasier because everything he'd said was the truth. I shook my head and grinned back at him before calling the bartender over for another round of drinks.

"What's going on?" Madelynne asked as she and Logan joined us.

Scott took a step to the side so I could talk to them and ended up standing directly behind Frasier. I introduced Christina's ghoul to them, then asked if they wanted a drink.

"No," she replied tersely. "What's going on?"

With a glance at Frasier, I turned and looped my arm through hers. "I have the need to powder my nose, care to join me?"

She nodded and we headed for the bathrooms. I'm sure Logan and Scott would have followed us if it hadn't been for our destination, but I wanted a few minutes alone with Madelynne.

As we walked across the room I brushed up against someone. Looking up, I realized it was the vampire who had been watching me earlier. He stared at me until we had moved past him, but he never said a word. When I turned back for a better look at the guy, he was gone.

When we were alone inside the bathroom, Madelynne crossed her arms and looked at me expectantly.

"So, interesting thing," I began softly. "I was looking at Frasier and he was telling me how I could trust him and that he was blood bound to me and whatever, and these funny little colors appeared around him. I think that he was telling the truth. It was quite interesting, he keeps saying that he's here to protect me."

"Maybe he is," she suggested.

"What if his idea of protecting me is to stake me and take me back to Salem?" I asked softly.

She shrugged. "He seems a little more passive than the rest."

"Well, he's not a vampire," I reminded her. "He wouldn't be as outspoken given our society. Petor's not saying much either. They seem to be getting along really well."

"If he is your ghoul, the Blood Walk will show it. That would explain why he acts the way he has been." She took a few moments to tell me that she had spoken to the others while I'd been in the hall with Jason. Not one of them believed that the Salem crew had my best interests at heart, in fact every one of Madelynne's friends thought they'd be likely to take matters into their own hands if I didn't willingly return to Salem. Unfortunately, I had to agree with her.

We rejoined the guys a few minutes later and led them back out on the dance floor for more stress relief. I even got Frasier to dance with me once or twice, although he kept trying to get a little too close for my tastes. I wondered how Christina had managed to keep enough distance from him to appease Jason's obvious jealousy.

Once or twice I caught a glimpse of Jason, Brenda and Rafe on the second floor balcony, standing at the rail and looking out over the dance floor. I knew they could see me, but I tried not to react to their presence. If they were wrong about who I was, I had nothing to worry about. If they were right, these few hours might be the last time I could be myself.

I'd been watching the clock, more or less, so I was surprised that only two and a half hours had passed when we received a mental summons from the Frenchman. As one we headed for the stairs and made our way to the third floor. The Salem group was just sitting down when we came in, and I noticed that all of the security guards had returned as well.

As we walked around the table to our chairs, I was surprised to realize that Frasier was still with us. I sat down without comment, and he took his place beside Petor at my back. Neither Brenda nor Jason seemed to like Frasier's choice. I wasn't sure I did either, but at that point as long as it made the Salem crew unhappy, I was all for it.

When everyone had been seated and the room fell silent, the prince nodded in the countess' direction. She looked once around the table before beginning.

"I have done the blood walk as desired," she told us. "Tina's sire is one Dougal Galloway, deceased. Her grandsire is Ewart Oakshot, also deceased. Beyond that we don't care, do we?" When no one spoke up, she took a sip of blood from a glass on the table before her and continued. "She's been quite a busy girl in the bond department. The oldest bond she holds as regent is a one third bond over Luke Thomas."

I recognized the name as one Brenda had given me earlier for the man in the photo album that she had so obviously disliked. I was rather surprised that he was blood bound to me as Brenda hadn't mentioned anything to that affect.

"The next is," she looked toward the Salem side of table, then to where Frasier stood behind me, "one Frasier O'Connell, fully blood bond to her, one year."

I glanced over my shoulder at the tall man standing at my shoulder and tried not to smile as he adjusted his shirt proudly. It was kind of a relief to know that he was bound to me, but I didn't like the fact that Christina's family looked so satisfied at the countess' words.

"The next is one Petor Andrews," she continued, "fully blood bound, a week and a half."

I breathed a mental sigh of relief. The Salem crew could no longer wonder if he were my ghoul, here was the proof. Petor was tied to me with bonds that were stronger than steel and twice as hard to break. The only surprise there was the length of the bond since supposedly Christina had only disappeared from Salem two nights ago. I wondered what else she had been hiding from her family.

"Next, one Arcady Voronov, one third bond, five days," she told us, studying at me intently. "He is her childe."

"You've been quite busy, Tina," Michael murmured as I stared at the countess in shock.

The surprises just kept right on coming. "Next one is Malcolm Robbins, fully bound, five days," she continued. "As thrall, quite recently Tina has broken a bond to Luke Thomas. Interestingly enough she is not bound to the clan, as all Tremere are required to be."

Apparently the countess' findings weren't only shocking to me but to Brenda as well. She pulled out a notebook and quickly jotted down a few notes. Jason didn't seem quite as surprised, but he still looked unhappy.

"Christina, you have been quite busy," Michael drawled. "It appears our work here is done."

"So, does this answer any questions?" the countess asked. "Resolve this matter?"

"I believe it resolves who she is," he replied, "but opens several more questions. Is this Arcady known to anyone here?"

Everyone looked at me as if I should know who he was, and perhaps I should have, but I didn't. I hated to keep repeating that I didn't remember anything, so I just looked up at Petor. "Do we know an Arcady?"

He thought for a moment then shook his head. "No."

"We just want to keep our friend from being a puppet to any who would wish to do her harm," Michael put in.

"Do any of these names mean anything to you?" the countess asked me.

I shot Michael a hard look before turning to her. "Brenda said Malcolm's name before, and Luke's, but I don't know who they are. I know who Petor and Frasier are but that's about it."

"At least we know one thing for certain," Jason murmured. "Her mind has been lost."

I raised an eyebrow at him. "There was a question about that before?"

"You weren't sure," he said with a smile.

"I'm sure I don't know who the hell I am," I replied coolly.

"Sweetheart," Michael interrupted, "we always knew someone was going through your sock drawer."

I didn't like the tone of his voice or the implication beneath his words. From the look Jason was giving him, he didn't either. I turned back to Brenda. "Didn't you say that I disappeared the night before last?" When she nodded, I said, "Then it stands to reason that you would know who these people are that are five days bound."

She shook her head. "I have no idea who Arcady Voronov is."

"No one has necessarily babysat you, Christina, you've had your own will about you, most of your life," Michael told me. When Brenda moved a little restlessly in her seat, he turned to look at her pointedly. "I choose not to baby sit my friends, nor past acquaintances." He turned his charismatic smile back on me. "You can come visit me anytime you want, sweetheart. The nightlife is charming."

"In LA," I said doubtfully. The nightlife might be, but as far as I was concerned Michael sure as hell wasn't winning any popularity contests.

"Yes," he drawled. "The West Coast blood is wonderful. You've seem to have had a lot of Russian blood lately."

Brenda turned to the Tremere end of the table. "Countess, is there any way that we can track this Arcady?" she asked respectfully. "I'm assuming that Christina must have had permission to embrace him. Given the fact that she is in the company of an obviously Russian man, and the fact that this name appears to be Russian in origin, is there any way that we can check with chantries in that area?"

"They only need ask permission in cities of the Camarilla," the countess told her. "With the fall of communism in the Russian states, so came the fall of the Camarilla in those areas. They are largely independent. They are not Sabbat controlled either, but organized chantries are few and far between."

"There is no way we can glean information from that part of the world?" she asked anxiously.

"Not immediately," was the calm reply.

"What's up with the whole 'not blood bound to the clan like they're supposed to be' thing?" I asked Brenda.

"I cannot say," she answered. "I performed the Blood Walk a little over a year ago in Salem and you were bound at that time."

I wondered why she had done the ritual on Christina, but I wasn't about to ask. "How do you break a blood bond?"

"To the clan I have no idea," she said, looking toward the countess. "I cannot conceive how it could happen. To an individual it takes time and strength of mind, but we're talking about magic different than our own."

"There are many ways I have heard to do it," the countess replied. "Magic."

"Luke was mentioned earlier," I murmured, looking at Brenda, "but no one said that I was blood bound to him."

"It was a bond that was frowned upon by the clan," she replied uncomfortably. "It was the reason you relocated to Salem."

That I could understand. Had the clan found out about the forbidden blood bond and forced me to leave the man I loved behind? I slapped my wrist mockingly in Brenda's direction. "Ah, bad girl."

"When it's to a Gangrel who wanted nothing but your knowledge and money," Brenda said sternly, "then yes, it was bad."

"And blood apparently," I murmured. Given her dislike of him, I doubted knowledge and money was all that Luke had wanted. I couldn't help but wonder what it was that Jason wanted from his

wife. "You may have proved that I am who you say I am, but you haven't proved that I'm not in danger in Salem."

"And I really have no way to do that," she replied honestly.

"You're in danger anywhere you go, my dear," Michael told me. "You can't even remember blood bonding these people or creating a childe. That would be considered dangerous. And you've been in the company of whom in the past week?"

He looked pointedly at Madelynn and Logan, which made me want to sprout claws and tear his face off. Michael had no right to judge my friends or my actions, I wasn't the simpering Tremere chit they remembered.

"When was the childe created?" he asked of no one in particular.

"Five days ago," I bit out.

"There's a discrepancy here," Brenda put in. "She's only been gone two nights."

"Then again," Jason said, leaning forward, "Malcolm could have been screwing with her during the day."

She nodded and looked at me. "There is obviously much magic going on in this situation and I don't really know how we can prove to you in any other way that you're not in danger."

"My dear, if you don't have the sense to know that you're in danger anywhere you go," Michael added, "there is nothing we can do for you and we are wasting our time."

Oh, I knew when I was in danger all right. I was in danger in this very room. These people wanted to erase who and what I was, to return my memories so I could be the well-behaved clone they'd once had under their thumb. From what the countess had just revealed, I hadn't always been that way, and I wasn't about to start jumping to their command again.

## Much Ado

Without a sense of confidence and I'm convinced  
That it's too much pressure to take  
Linkin Park - Crawling

"Is it possible to create a child with blood from someone else even with magic?" Jason asked.

The countess shook her head. "No."

"I don't doubt the fact that this individual exists," Brenda began. "In the time frame given, it falls into the fact that this is magic that we're dealing with. It is nothing that any of us except Christina can fathom and she can't even fathom that because it was her mortal life."

Once again she was talking as if I weren't in the room and it made me impatient. "Do you know a Vladimir?"

She looked surprised. "No."

"It looks like you've developed a taste for the foreign type," Michael drawled with a smile that was almost a sneer.

I ignored him and fished out one of the necklaces from beneath my shirt. I held it so that she could see the engraving of the triangle and the eyes. "What about this symbol?"

She leaned closer and peered at the pendant. "What is it?"

I didn't want to hand it over, but I was too impatient to wait for her to walk around the table. I lifted the chain over my head and slid it across the table. She caught it and studied it for a long moment.

"Thank you, Vladimir," Jason murmured, looking over her shoulder.

When Brenda turned the disk over, I thought her eyes were going to pop out of her head. She was visibly shaken to the point that her hand trembled. While Jason was unmoved by the symbol, Michael seemed to know exactly what it was.

"You don't know how you came to have this?" she demanded.

I shrugged. "When I woke up it was on my neck."

"It's the Salubri Clan symbol," she said thoughtfully, gazing intently down at the object in her hand.

Rafe noticed her concentration and seemed to be worried about it. "Brenda?"

At that moment she dropped the necklace to the table and leaned back as far as she could in her chair. If she had been shaken before, now she looked shell shocked.

"What's wrong?" I demanded.

Jason laid a hand on her arm. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," she said, responding to him slowly. "Just give me a minute." It was an effort, but she managed to collect her wits before looking up at Peter. "Are we to assume correctly that you retain a little more memories than she does?"

He shifted a little, uncomfortable to be in the limelight. "I remember most of my childhood and adult life."

"What is the last thing you remember before coming to Detroit?"

"I got drunk in a bar in Smolensk," he replied. "I remember a castle but not much of it, then I woke up in the road standing over Tina."

Brenda looked at me and a moment later I could feel the mental connection opening up in my mind. I decided to roll with it for the moment and see what she was up to. When I got a series of pictures from her I was glad that I had.

I saw a vision of myself handing the necklace across the table to Brenda a few moments before. Then I saw myself sitting on the bed in my room at the pub looking down at the necklace as I had been my first night in Detroit. Some of my necklaces were lying about me on the bed while the rest were still around my neck.

The next vision was from the perspective of my own eyes as I looked down at the pendant. There were four sets of legs in my peripheral vision, one in a suit, two pairs in jeans, and one wearing a cloak. The Salubri symbol was quite clear as I held the disk in my hand.

Once again the scene shifted to what I thought must be moments before the previous vision. I was looking straight ahead at an older man wearing a suit. To his left stood Petor, wearing jeans. Another man stood to his right wearing a cloak, his long hair twisted into dreadlocks, and a calm look in his almost colorless eyes. The last man was the most remarkable for two reasons. The first was that his dark hair didn't quite cover his pointed ears, and the other was that he was nearly translucent. I could almost see completely through him.

"Hey," I murmured with a start as I realized that I recognized the last man and I fumbled to pull the photograph from my pocket. I showed it to Brenda. "That guy is right here."

"Marcus," Jason murmured.

Brenda nodded. "That's Marcus. He was your boyfriend—"

"Until Malcolm killed him," Jason interrupted.

"—when you were a mortal," she continued. "Just before you disappeared you'd been looking into your past and getting some memories back from your mortal life. One of the things you found out was that this Malcolm individual killed Marcus."

"Because he was getting close to you," he added.

Something about that didn't sound right. "If he's dead, what does he have to be sorry about? It says 'I'm truly sorry about everything'."

She didn't seem to have an answer for that one. She took the picture, but apparently it didn't mean much to her. She sighed, and I wondered if she'd gotten any visions off touching the photo. If she did, she wasn't offering them to me.

It was hard for me to remember that she really was my sister as she had claimed. I didn't know her, didn't necessarily even like her at this point. I wondered if I would ever bring myself to trust her, or if I'd always be second-guessing everything she said and did.

"Since we're speaking of strange individuals," Michael announced softly, "I was followed for quite some time this evening by someone that I do not recognize from this room."

"What did he look like?" Jason and I asked simultaneously.

Michael described the gentleman as human, tall and well dressed. "He followed me into the billiard room. I followed him into the lounge and lost him there."

"There was this guy that was watching me when we were out there," I said thoughtfully. "He was bald and rather tall, well built, dressed like a Ventrue in maybe an Armani suit." I tried to remember what else was remarkable about the man. "He was smoking a cigar."

Michael reacted as if I'd shot him. He reached under his jacket for his gun, then realized he was unarmed. Brenda tried to lay a hand on his, but he pushed her away. His eyes darted around the room as if it were some kind of trap that he was caught in.

"Who is it?" I asked softly, concerned about his reaction to my description

"We are not—I am not safe," he blurted out, his eyes still searching frantically for an exit.

Brenda looked at the prince. "I have one word for you," she said solemnly. "Sabbat, in your city."

The Frenchman leaned forward. "I take it by your reaction you've had dealings with him before."

Michael nodded, and to my surprise he was so upset that his hands were shaking. "With all due respect, I don't even feel safe within the presence of your guards."

"Answer my question, boy," the prince snapped.

"He is one of the Sabbat," he replied, obviously struggling to pull himself together. "He is responsible for ruining my unlife and replacing everything that I was, stealing it for a time."

"He has messed with you once and you feel he's going to do it again." The prince sat back and studied Michael closely, searchingly.

"Messed with is the understatement," he replied.

"He was involved with a Tremere antitribu that switched Michael's soul with another's," Brenda added.

Michael gave her a look that said he'd rather not hear the story again. "There's no reason for me to stay here. I'm safer alone."

"Yes, but if he's out there and you leave—" Jason began.

He didn't let him finish. "Please excuse me." Michael rose to his feet and would have left the table, but I stopped him with my words.

"So you walk out of the safe house into the arms of the Sabbat," I drawled. "That's real smart."

"The Sabbat are in the safe house, Christina," he reminded me coolly.

"Yes," I agreed, ignoring his misuse of my name, "but they can't do anything." No one could here, which was why it was called the Sanctuary.

"They're probably waiting for you outside," Jason put in.

"The Sabbat do not follow the rules of the Camarilla," Michael insisted.

"Do you think they can get to you in this place?" he asked.

Brenda laid a hand on Michael's arm, but he shrugged off her touch. "I'm not fine unless I have a Desert Eagle in one hand and someone else's throat in the other," he said fiercely.

"To quote something that was said earlier this evening," I drawled, "'don't be a fool.'" Half of me was enjoying the arrogant man's upset, but the other half was wondering what this bad ass could be so frightened of.

Brenda stood and laid a hand on Michael's chest, to Rafe's obvious dismay. Unfortunately she didn't see her husband's distress as she was intent on the Ventrue. "Michael you can't just walk out of here," she insisted reasonably.

He looked at her in surprise. "Should I sit and wait for the Sabbat to come for me?"

"They can't do anything while you're in here," she reminded him.

He stared down at her for a long moment, then relaxed just a bit. "Perhaps that's what we're dealing with Christina here."

"The Sabbat?" I asked in surprise.

"Perhaps it goes farther than we know," he suggested.

He had a point. "Maybe they switched my soul." It was possible that this body was bound as the Countess had said, but my soul was from someone else.

"That is no small matter to speak of," he warned me gravely.

"But if you leave the safety of the Sanctuary," I replied calmly, "you're more of a fool than you claim I am."

"When one's soul isn't even safe within one's body," he demanded angrily, "how should I think I'm safe within a building surrounded by other bodies?"

"You have people here that care about you and are going to protect you," Jason said, his warm voice soft and reasonable, "even at the cost of their own lives."

Michael gathered himself and turned to the head of the table. "I defer to the prince."

"While you are all quibbling over whether he stays or goes," Madelynne drawled, "obviously there are Sabbat in the city, which puts all of us in danger, not just this one person who is all 'poor me-ish'."

Somehow I managed to restrain myself from laughing at her summation of Michael's attitude.

"Have you ever dealt with the Sabbat?" Brenda asked Madelynne.

"No."

"Then you have no idea what it is like," she said fiercely, making believe that she had dealt with them in the past.

"We need to look at the city's safety," I murmured.

"We need to look at the big picture," Madelynne added.

"We need to take care of this, Michael," Brenda told him. "He can't be allowed to remain free to do this again."

"He followed you to the city for a reason," my pack mate stated bluntly.

"I have my own resources in LA," he told Brenda calmly. "I don't plan on staying in Detroit much longer. I would rather lure him back to my own doorstep."

"Fool," I hissed softly.

"Either that or you're going to walk out of here and put him face to face with everything else that you hold dear," Jason put in, looking pointedly at Brenda.

"How do you know he's after you?" Madelynne demanded of Michael.

"He may not be," Jason agreed, looking directly at me. "He may be after other things to screw with you."

"If he were after Christina," Michael agreed.

"Which makes a lot of sense," he replied slowly, "because that would screw with all of us."

Michael shot a glance in my direction. "Well, perhaps we bait the hook."

I wasn't about to rise to his 'bait' comment. I turned to look at the prince, waiting for him to take charge of the conversation. I couldn't believe he would leave the defense of the city in the hands of these strangers.

Michael followed my gaze and straightened his suit. "I do believe you can have your seat," he told Brenda as he held her chair out for her. He looked to Madelynn as he sat down himself. "Don't think that I'm scared."

"Then why are you running?" she sneered.

"I would rather fight on my terms," he boasted. "That's the only way to win, and I've won enough of them."

I leaned closer to Scott. "Did I mention 'fool'?" I said in a soft undertone.

"You have brought this menace to my city," the prince growled at Michael. "It is obvious that they followed one of you here."

"He escaped from Salem over a year ago," Brenda told him.

"I expect you to take care of this problem," he said, looking mostly to the Salem side of the table. Once in a while his eye fell on me and I knew he included me when he spoke of solutions.

"It took a pack of his friends to take me last time," Michael told us. "I'll make sure that I'm not alone when we meet again."

"See that you're not," the prince advised. "I don't want to have to take care of this."

"I'd like to know exactly where he came from and why he's here," Jason murmured.

"Well, we could all go take a couple of steps on the dance floor," Michael drawled. "Perhaps he's just here for a good time."

The prince turned his gaze on Madelynn. "You say he was watching you two?"

"He was watching me," I told him.

His good eye turned to me. "I expect should you see him or any of his that you take care of it as well. His gaze continued around the table until each of us was clear on the matter.

"Of course, my prince," I assured him. "But Madelynn and her friends had nothing to do with bringing this gentleman to the city."

"If he is here for you and they are harboring you," he returned firmly, "then they are at as much responsible for him as you are."

I nodded, seeing his point. "Perhaps it is time for me to find an alternate place to stay. I would not wish to put Madelynn and her friends in danger."

"That is between you and yours," he replied.

"You are safe with us," Madelynn insisted.

"Is where you are staying safe enough that they can't get in if they are after her?" Jason asked pointedly.

"Remember, this place is not secure enough," Michael reminded him. "They got in here, they can surely—"

"The Sanctuary is open to all," the prince interrupted.

"I don't want to put you in danger," I told Madelynne softly.

"They're already in the city," she reminded me. "We're all in danger."

She had a point, with the Sabbat around no one was safe. As much as I didn't want to put the pack at risk, I knew I could help to protect them. I nodded reluctantly and sat back in my chair.

"Madelynne, is there anything we can do to help secure your location?" Jason offered. "Financially or otherwise?"

She shook her head. "No."

I thought perhaps she might have spoken too quickly. "What kind of weapons do you have?" I asked him.

He rattled off at least a dozen, then added rather pointedly, "Including a very nice handgun that Cormac gave us both."

Before I could reply, the prince stood up. "This is interesting and all, but I have business to attend to," he said dismissively.

Within moments everyone was on their feet and headed for the door.

## *I'll Show You Mine*

It's the same old game

It's just a different score

Melissa Etheridge - Lover Please

Scott followed me to where Brenda stood on the landing waiting for me. She handed my things over with a sheepish smile and an apology for wrinkling the picture.

"I don't know how Madelynne feels about this," I offered hesitantly, glancing between her and Jason, who was standing nearby, "but maybe we should get together and discuss this since the prince has dumped it in our lap."

"We have lodgings at a non Kindred hotel," Brenda replied. "We have a suite of rooms that should be secured if you'd like to meet there. I need to contact people in Salem, have files forwarded."

"I have weapons if you need them as well," Jason offered.

I smiled grimly. "Oh, I'm a walking arsenal, trust me."

"You usually are," Brenda murmured.

"You don't carry half of what I carry," Jason told me.

I stared at him for a moment, wondering how someone could possibly be more armed. "Okay, a Desert Eagle, two Glocks, a PPK and a knife?"

Brenda nodded. "That's about standard for you."

"Why are you so lightly armed?" Jason asked at the same time.

"I don't know, given—" I was going to say given the circumstances, but I didn't want to make them think I suspected them more than they already knew. "Okay, so I'm who you say I am," I admitted reluctantly, "but we've already discussed the fact that you can't assure me that I was safe or not there and I'd really rather not—"

"Apparently you're not safe here either, hon," he reminded me.

No one was safe anywhere in town as long as the Sabbat were in town. "Yeah, but I'd really rather not walk into your hotel room, honestly."

Brenda seemed upset at my words, but she did her best to hide it. "Fine," she bit out coolly.

"I really don't want to end up with more neutral spots," Jason protested.

"We need to get out and start reconnoitering," she said impatiently, "find out where the hell these Sabbat are."

"Do you want us to meet you where you are?" he asked.

I raised an eyebrow, amazed that he would even think I would give them the location of Madelynne's haven.

Brenda threw up her hands in disgust. "Well what the hell do you want?"

"You're the one that suggested getting together," Jason reminded me. "You won't do it there—" He broke off and looked at Brenda. "I swear she's remembering more of herself every time I talk to her," he claimed.

I was saved from commenting by Madelynne joining us. I turned to her, anxious to have her input on the dilemma of where to meet the Salem crew.

"Madelynne, they're suggesting that we go back to their hotel to discuss tactics," I told her, "which I think the discussing tactics is a good idea. I don't like the idea of bringing them back to the haven and I'm not sure I like the idea of going into their hotel room but it is a hotel."

"We haven't even stayed there," Brenda protested.

I ignored her outburst. "I think that it's a much better idea than taking them back to where you live. Is that okay? Can we meet them there?"

She shrugged, but I knew she didn't like the idea. As much as I didn't like it either, I didn't see any other alternative.

"Right now, as much as I hate to say it, our problems are secondary," Jason said softly.

I glanced at him, and nodded. "He's right."

"Right, but there are others to think of besides the ones that are here," Madelynne reminded me.

"I know it, and I hope that they would be safe right where they are," I replied, "and not worry about taking them to this hotel room." I didn't want to put more of the pack in danger, things were bad enough as it was.

"There are things that have to be done," she added.

"Figure it out," Brenda said dismissively, walking away and pulling out her cell phone.

"I'd really rather keep them out of this if we can, Madelynne," I told her firmly. "There are enough of us in danger."

She nodded reluctantly. "We can meet them at their hotel, but we need to go back now."

I was relieved that she'd agreed. "Okay, we'll stop at the haven then meet them at their hotel room."

"Is there a bar at the hotel?" she asked Jason.

"I don't want to speak tactics in the middle of a human area," he replied.

"He's probably right," I murmured. It wasn't a good idea to involve mortals or to risk them overhearing our plans.

Madelynne didn't like it, but she knew this wasn't the place to argue the point. "We'll discuss it as a pack," she warned me. When I agreed, she went to join Logan near the stairs.

I turned to Petor and asked him for the phone he still had in his pocket. Turning to Jason, I asked him if he knew the code to access the rest of the functions. Not surprisingly, he did. He took a moment to show me how to use it, and went over the first few numbers set up on speed dial. I assured him that I would call him when I figured out where we would meet them.

"Have the biggest guy pull the vehicle close before going out on the street," he cautioned.

I glanced at Scott, who was still standing silently next to me. I'd planned on the going for Madelynne's car myself, but I wasn't sure he'd let me do it alone. "I'm sure we can do that."

Jason looked up at my pack mate. "Take care of her."

Scott gave a derisive snort, but didn't otherwise respond. Jason had no concept of how Scott felt toward the pack, and now of course I was one of them. Scott didn't need an outsider to tell him to protect his family.

"Can we trust Frasier to go with us?" I asked Scott. "He is blood bound."

"To you," he replied.

When Frasier would have spoke up, Jason laid a hand on his arm. "Your weapons are with us."

"I know," he said reluctantly.

"Come with us now," Jason told him, "and maybe later if she feels more comfortable you can go with her." He didn't look like he liked the idea of Frasier joining me, and I couldn't help but wonder why he'd suggested it.

"Why don't you go with them so you can get your guns?" I suggested. "You do have guns, right?"

From the look on Frasier's face, he had more weapons than all of us put together. I could feel his eyes on me as I followed the others down the stairs, but I didn't turn back. The last thing I needed was another person to keep an eye on. Protecting Petor and the rest of the pack was going to be hard enough.

Since neither of us would let the other go alone, Scott and I ended up going for the vehicles together. Fortunately, we didn't run into any trouble fetching Madelynn's car and his truck. Alex rode in the truck with Scott leaving the rest of us to ride with Madelynn.

Once we were on the way back to the Pub, I leaned forward to talk to Logan. "They want us to meet them at their hotel," I told him. "It's a much better idea than bringing them to the pub, but Madelynn wasn't sure about it. What do you think?"

She shot me a curious look. "I don't see why we need to discuss it with them at all."

"They've dealt with him before," I reminded her. "I don't like the idea of going into their territory like that, but first of all it's better than Salem, second of all it's better than bringing them into our haven, and third of all, they've dealt with him, we need to talk to them about him."

"One, how do you know they're not going to pull something?" she demanded. "Two, how do you know they're not working with the Sabbat?"

"I don't think from Michael's reaction they're working with them," I reasoned.

"He could be a really good actor," she told me.

"He'd have to be a damn good one," I replied, remembering how badly his hands had shook. "And Brenda reacted about the same."

"How do you know they're not going to do something to you while you're there?"

"I'll be fully armed," I reminded her.

She shook her head. "I'm sure they will be too."

"I can take care of myself," I told her. "Okay, honestly it probably would be better if you guys didn't go, if I went alone. Then I wouldn't be putting you in danger."

"Would we knowingly send you into something like that?" she demanded softly.

"You wouldn't be sending me," I replied calmly. "I'd be going of my own free will."

"Right," she admitted, "but as a group we protect one another."

"As a group we're responsible for taking care of the Sabbath thing," I reminded her. "Do you really think we can trust them to do it? They've dealt with him before, but he got away." I turned back to Logan. "What do you think?"

"They do know more about this guy and his ways," he admitted slowly, "but I don't like going into their haven."

"Got a better suggestion?" I was open to one if he did.

He shrugged. "Not really."

"We stay on our toes and take a lot of stakes," I suggested. "Are we up to it?"

"That's up to Madelynne." He reached over to take her hand, making her smile.

"We don't have any other options," she admitted at last.

"No good ones anyway," I muttered as we followed Scott into the parking lot of the bar. Actually there were plenty of other options we could take, but none that wouldn't risk the prince's wrath.

Once we made sure everyone was inside, safe and armed, Madelynne went off to make a few phone calls. Scott and I went over the defenses once again, but we agreed that there was nothing more we could do to prepare for an attack.

I went up to my room and called Jason for directions to their hotel. Once I'd gotten them, an awkward silence filled the line that I wasn't sure how to fill. This guy was supposed to be my husband, so leaving it like this seemed cold. On the other hand, I didn't remember him, and I wasn't about to start pretending something I didn't feel.

"It's okay," he said softly. "I understand."

I was glad somebody did. "Okay. Goodbye."

"Bye," he replied. "Love ya."

I hung up without answering and stared down at the phone for a long moment, confused. I wasn't sure if I was supposed to have returned the affectionate sign off and it bothered me that I hadn't had a reply to his last words. I shook my head to clear it and rejoined the pack downstairs.

Madelynne was standing near Howard who was intent on his computer. Within a short time he found the flight that Roger Campbell had come in on. Two of the tickets had been purchased together, one for Roger and the other for a Charles Frederick. Bob Dole had been seated in the third seat of that cluster. The flight had originated in Seattle, and Howard was able to print out the full passenger manifest.

"Is Seattle a Sabbath held city?" I asked.

"I believe it is," he replied. "I think its Tzimisce controlled."

"Can you run a background check?" Madelynne asked him. "Find out if they're staying in the city, where they're from, who they are. You can call us when you get the information."

He hit a few keys while looking intently at the screen. "Thirteen passengers got off in Detroit before the plane went on to New York." He added that it was a routine business charter flight that often ran between Seattle and Detroit.

We decided to head for the hotel around one thirty. Maggie wanted to come with us, and despite my arguments against it she pouted until Madelynne told her she could go. I didn't like it any, I knew that her naïveté would get her into trouble if we didn't keep a close eye on her.

The others had changed into more comfortable clothing but the only change I made was to pull out all of the non-religious necklaces I was wearing from beneath my shirt. Once again we had to go in two vehicles. Maggie and Alex rode with Scott in his truck, while the rest of us went with Logan in Madelynne's car.

Although we were armed to the teeth, we didn't have a problem getting through the hotel to the room number Jason had given me. Scott's weapons were the most obvious, he wore a figure eight under an unbuttoned shirt and held a baseball bat clenched in his fist. That's not to say that the rest of us were any less armed, our weapons were simply better concealed.

## *We Gather Together*

Did you ever feel like you were helpless?

Did you ever feel like an open wound?

Bon Jovi - Save A Prayer

When I knocked, Frasier opened the door as if he'd been waiting right next to it for us to arrive. He looked me over anxiously, and when he was satisfied that I was still in one piece, he stepped aside.

Someone had arranged for several long tables to be set up near the center of the room. Their surfaces were cluttered with maps of the city. Jason, Frasier and James were bent over them with pencils and a phone book. Brenda and Rafe were leafing through a manila folder, while Michael was standing near the window brooding.

They all looked over at us when we walked in, and it was clear that we weren't the only ones who'd decided to arm themselves. From what I could tell, everyone seemed to be wearing shoulder holsters. It was hard telling what else they might be carrying, but just inside the door was a rolled leather bag of some sorts that put off the smell of gun oil.

Maggie nervously edged closer to Scott, and I wished she wasn't standing between us so I could do the same. If we weren't careful the Sabbath wouldn't have to do anything to destroy the people in this room, we'd self-destruct.

"Did you find anything?" I asked calmly in an effort to break the tension.

"We're trying to piece together probable places that they might be hanging out based on information that we have from Salem," Brenda offered, relaxing a little.

"I'm sure if we wait they'll come to us," Michael murmured, turning back to the windows.

Madelynne pulled out the folder she'd brought and went over the information that Howard had given us on the plane and it's passengers. Brenda offered to have one of their people look into the information, but Madelynne told her that we had someone working on it.

"Honestly, I have the feeling that they will come to us," Michael said firmly as he finally joined us. "And really, to know how they arrived here is not as important as knowing they have arrived."

"You didn't know it did you?" Madelynne shot back irritably. I could tell she'd had enough of his bullshit but I hoped she could hold her temper until after we left his company.

"I do now," he replied quickly before glancing around. "Was that an Outlander speaking to me?"

Every Gangrel eye in the room turned on him, including mine. If Michael didn't start watching his mouth, he'd find himself shoved in a closet with a stake through his heart. Or better yet, staked in the middle of a park as Sabbath bait.

I think he got the point because he backed down quickly. "I hope you're worth your weight in blood," he told my pack mates. "If not, you might as well make your way back to someplace safe."

"I thought you knew me?" I countered in a low voice. "Don't you know whether I can handle myself or not?"

"Oh, I know you, darling," he drawled. "You're quite capable of taking care of yourself, when you can remember yourself. Lets hope you can remember your capabilities."

"I know what I can do," I assured him, wanting nothing more than to prove it with him as a target. "You should see what Scott can do with a pool cue."

He eyed my pack mate. "Probably not enough."

Before I could offer to have Scott demonstrate exactly what he could do with a sharp piece of wood, Jason leaning over the map sidetracked me. Oddly enough the fact that he was fully armed and obviously prepared for a fight made me feel safer.

Thankfully Brenda distracted my wayward thoughts with the tale of what the Sabbat had done while in Salem last year. The story wasn't a pretty one, by any means. They had run rampant across the town, demolishing a local bar and killing many mortals had been their first attack. Next they had invaded a private home and killed all but one of the five family members. James seemed taken aback at Brenda's description of the house, but he didn't say anything to explain his obvious surprise.

She described a ritual one of the Sabbat had performed to send several people into an alternate universe. Christina and Rafe had apparently been the first to be exchanged with their counterparts from the other world, followed not long after by Brenda, Cormac, and two others. Jason had avoided the switch only because Frasier had pulled him back out of the spell range at the last moment.

Later the invaders had taken over a public library and hung people from the ceiling in preparation for their blood rites. Among their numbers had been a rogue werewolf, and from the sounds of things her preferred food had been children. Jason, Frasier and Stephen, Cormac's werewolf nephew, had driven them off and rescued Michael, whose soul had been trapped in a mortal body.

On the last night of the Sabbat invasion, they had assaulted a bar called Guilty Pleasures during its opening celebration. Nearly all of the city's Kindred population had been there, and they had been able to drive the black hats off. Unfortunately, the Sabbat fell back to a local teen group home where they had killed or embraced most of the occupants. After a long arduous battle, Michael had been restored to his body and the only Sabbat member to escape destruction had been Roger Campbell.

Roger had been taken to the Tremere chantry and placed in a holding cell where he had remained for several weeks. One night during a particularly intense storm and subsequent power outage he managed to escape. There had been some speculation that one of the Tremere had helped him get away, but as the woman had already met final death, the truth would never be known.

The sheer brutality of the attacks was horrifying. If I hadn't wanted to be involved before hearing Brenda's story, now I knew I would do whatever I had to do to help them take Roger Campbell out.

While the others busied themselves with plans and strategies, I found myself next to Jason. Standing this close I could smell his skin, and it was all that I had imagined it would be. I wanted to move closer, to touch him and look into his eyes, but I forced myself to pay attention to the maps on the table.

"Do you have any idea where they might be?" he asked while the others talked about possible havens for the Sabbat. "Have they figured anything out yet?"

"I didn't live here until two nights ago," I reminded him with a shrug. "Howard is supposed to call us when he finds something."

Jason, Frasier and I discussed the plane and the distance from the airport to the club while Petor stood silently nearby. Of course we all knew the Sabbat could be anywhere, even in the hotel we were standing in. The sound of the other's conversation flowed around us leaving us in a little pocket of our own for a time.

"How did they deal with the Sabbat last time?" Jason murmured to himself.

"Bruce staked him," Frasier answered.

"That's right, but Bruce is in Nashville." He ran a hand through his hair leaving it tousled.

"Is Lord Blackwell the only one who can stake this fellow?" Michael demanded, joining our conversation. "I mean, come on. We can take care of this."

"If I remember correctly he was after Bruce, was he not?" Jason murmured thoughtfully.

"I don't know, I guess," Frasier replied with a shrug. "You know we weren't there in the end, we were with Christina. We had to take her back to the chantry, she was shot."

I noticed Jason's sidelong glance in Brenda's direction, but didn't understand it. "Did I get shot often?" I asked apprehensively.

"Not really," he replied with a smile. "That time it was her accidentally shooting you. It's a long story, let's not get into it now. She felt really bad."

Brenda had shot her sister? "Okay, you expect me to trust you," I nearly growled, "but she shot me?"

"Things happened," he said defensively, "it was completely accidental. She didn't even touch a gun for I don't know how long after that. You're the one that put the gun back in her hand."

It was too confusing for me. Brenda was my sister and she supposedly loved me, but she had 'accidentally' shot me. I wondered how many of Christina's other loved ones had decided to take a gun to her. "So, did you ever shoot me?"

"No," he said quickly and firmly. "I couldn't even if I wanted to."

I looked to Frasier for confirmation, and he smiled reassuringly.

"Hey," Madelynne said loudly, catching my attention. "Howard called. Of the thirteen names, nine of them have no birth or death certificates or red flags. They're completely nonexistent. Two of them were sitting with Roger on the plane."

"Hell, even I've got a birth certificate," I muttered darkly.

"What is the name on it?" Jason asked softly.

"Tina Elizabeth Andrews," I replied. When he stiffened, I added soothingly, "I'm Petor's sister."

"Your father would not be happy to hear that," he told me, relaxing a bit.

"My father's alive?" The surprises seemed to be never ending.

"Yes, he lives in San Francisco, he's mortal," he replied, rubbing his temple. "My head hurts."

I glanced at Petor and Frasier. "Maybe if we had one of the guys take an aspirin," I suggested.

He laughed briefly before returning his attention to the maps on the table. "We should check for hotel reservations."

"We can have Howard take care of that," I told him. At his blank look, I added, "He's in the pack. He can find that stuff, he found some stuff for me." Which reminded me of something I'd meant to ask earlier. "So who's looking into my credit cards?"

"That was me," he admitted.

I smiled. "You didn't hide your tracks very well."

"I intentionally didn't," he explained patiently. "I wanted to let you know that someone was looking for you, trying to find out where you were."

I studied his face for a long moment, watching as he looked at the maps and took notes on a pad of paper. I wasn't sure how I was supposed to feel about this man, but I definitely felt something. In a way it was the same as what I felt when I was close to Frasier, a vibe that resonated deep inside of me, but in another way it was much different. I wanted to smooth his hair back from his face, to look into his eyes and get to know this man, really know him.

He glanced up and caught my intense gaze. "Yes?"

Embarrassed I looked away, pretending interest in the maps. There was so much I wanted to ask him about; how and where he'd met Christina, why they'd decided to get married, where they had gotten married. I'd heard bits and pieces about their relationship, but not enough to get an idea of what she felt for him. I wondered if the Tremere had forced the marriage because of her blood bond to Luke.

Jason reached under his jacket and slowly pulled out a handgun. "Do you have one that looks like that?" he asked, showing me the symbols inlaid in the handle.

It looked a lot like the gun that Petor and I had found in the case and I told him as much. They were identical down to the inscriptions on the barrel. "I was surprised that I came up with the code to the case," I added.

"Why would you be surprised?"

"Because I couldn't remember it." I was getting damn tired of repeating that I didn't remember anything they expected me to know. "I tried random numbers."

A corner of his mouth turned upward. "Did you call France or something?"

I smiled but let the subject change. "I called Cormac. I hit redial. Is he that rude to everybody?"

"Nice guy," he assured me. "Hard guy. A little short on the personality sometimes."

Frasier said something to Petor that made him chuckle and me look at the two of them. "What's with this alternate reality thing?" I asked Jason softly.

He smiled. "Which one?"

I blinked, but didn't ask how many alternate realities we'd been to. "The one I found him at."

"Ramadan?" He shrugged. "What do you want to know about it?"

"I don't know," I replied awkwardly. "Just kind of making conversation." Actually, I just wanted to hear his voice.

He looked down at the maps thoughtfully for a long moment before speaking. "I was going through a hard time when we met at the holding," he said softly. "Lena's kidnapping made me face the fact that I had to go on with my life. Frasier helped us get her out of the monastery and you brought him back with you. When we got back I realized that I had to get over my issues and work on getting you back."

"So we were arguing," I replied, filling in the gaps with a leap of intuition.

"I wouldn't consider it arguing," he told me with an uncomfortable look. "It was more me not understanding myself and being an ass."

"At least you admit it," I murmured teasingly. "I was right, I'm sure, 'cause I'm a woman and we are always right, right?"

He smiled and his whole face lit up. "I'll remember that when I need another hand attached." At my confused look, he added, "I'll tell you that one later, but the short story is that Chaos cut off my hand and delivered it to Lena."

I glanced down at where his hands were still going over the maps. The fact that he had both of them now didn't mean he was a liar, given enough blood and time Kindred can regrow any body part save the head. I wasn't sure what to think about his claim of Chaos' actions.

After a moment he glanced up at Michael. "I have a great idea," he said dryly. "We could put you in the middle of the park with a big sign."

As much as I wanted him out of my hair, I certainly didn't want to see him meet final death. Staked maybe, but not destroyed. "He's annoying but not that annoying," I murmured softly.

"Michael's a great guy and I'm glad he's on our side," Jason told me.

I glanced at the Ventrue and stifled the urge I had to stake him. "So you say."

"I would rather not stay in these accommodations," Michael said loudly.

"We can move tonight but we have to come up with a plan," Jason reminded him.

He was brisk and business like, which suited me fine. We had the Sabbath to deal with and people to protect. I didn't need to get wrapped up in him to the extent that I forgot what was important.

"I guess I've missed a little of the conversation," I said sheepishly, turning to Madelynne.

"There's nine total," she told me, "including Roger and Charles."

"And the other seven have no birth certificates," Jason added, showing that he had been paying attention. "Can we get security tapes from the airport? If we can get pictures it will make it much easier to find them."

"Let me call Howard and see what he can come up with," she replied, pulling out her phone.

"It would be great if we had faces to go with these names," he added.

# Family

I don't know what to believe in  
You don't know who I am  
Fiona Apple - Never is a Promise

From the corner of my eye I saw Brenda go into one of the bedrooms that was off of the sitting room. She pulled out a bag that very much resembled the one near the door although it was a lot smaller. Laying it on the bed, she unrolled it to reveal numerous pockets filled with vials and pouches.

Everyone else was occupied for the moment, and it seemed like they had the planning well under control. Brenda's bag intrigued me and I found myself in the doorway of her room. I hesitated, not sure if she would welcome my presence given the animosity that I'd shown her earlier.

She looked up from her inspection of a small bag of herbs and smiled at me. "Oh, come in," she said, obviously pleased to have a moment alone with me.

I glanced over my shoulder at the others, but they were all intent on their maps and strategies. Petor and Frasier were listening to something Logan was saying, so I knew they'd be safe enough and I'd have a moment's peace before anyone started looking for me. Hesitantly I took a step further into the room.

Brenda was systematically checking things in the bag, tightening the caps of vials that held numerous liquids, some clear and others colored. None of it looked familiar.

I eyed it curiously. "Magic stuff?"

"Yeah," she said, glancing up. "I was just checking my ritual bag to make sure everything is secure. I've been jostling it about on the journey."

"Eye of newt, lizards tongue?" I drawled.

"Actually, owl feathers, crocodile tears," she corrected with a smile. "Didn't you have yours with you?"

I kept forgetting that Christina was Tremere. "I have one of those?"

"Yeah, it was gone from the house," she told me, frowning.

"Wasn't on me when I woke up," I replied with a shrug.

"Great," she murmured. "Well, we'll set about teaching you and establish a new one. It shouldn't be hard, you always were far better than me in Thaumaturgy."

"I was?" It was hard to get my mind around the idea that not only had Christina been into magic, she'd been good at it.

"Yeah," she admitted. "I've lent myself more to the Auspex side of our disciplines."

"The funny lights?"

"The auras?" she asked quickly. "Have you been seeing them?"

I shrugged, not wanting to admit it but not seeing a reason to lie about it either. "Sometimes."

"Do you know what the colors mean?" At my blank look, she said, "The different colors mean different emotions, they tell you what people are feeling."

Which made sense, kind of. "I was looking at Frasier's earlier and I knew he wasn't lying to me."

"Frasier does have an odd aura," she replied with a smile. "We never could figure that out."

"What's odd about it?" It had looked like Brenda's to me, except for the colors.

"One of the things you will glean from reading auras is you will be able to detect whether a person is Kindred or human," she explained. "The Kindred's will be paler and for some reason Frasier's is pale like a Kindred."

"What is it when they're vibrant?" I asked, remembering the colors that had danced around Casilde.

"That is a werecreature," she told me. "Whose colors were like that?"

There was no reason not to tell her. "Casilde. I figured out she was a werecreature when I saw the tail, but I saw the colors before that. I think cat for that one."

"I wasn't paying that much attention," she admitted. "I'm sure Rafe would be able to tell for sure."

Rafe, her pretty boy husband. I smiled a little and glanced through the doorway to where he was glaring daggers at Michael. "Is there a reason he doesn't like the Ventrue?" I asked softly, taking a few more steps into the room. "Other than the fact that Michael is Michael, 'cause I don't like him much either."

"Well, Michael is Michael," she murmured. There was a tone to her voice, a dreamy quality that was telling.

I nodded thoughtfully. "But you like Michael."

She ran a hand through her hair nervously. "Oh, gosh, you're going to make me relive this, aren't you?"

"Hey, if you don't want to, don't tell me," I assured her. It wasn't my place to intrude on her life.

"No, it's important that you know everything." She took a deep breath and blew it out slowly. "I was Michael's ghoul before I was embraced. Antonio adopted Michael just as he adopted you."

Which made me wonder if this Antonio was some kind of foster care center for abandoned Kindred. Then again, depending on his age, perhaps he felt he needed the diversion adopting a childe would give him.

"I met Michael when I was working at Cesar's Palace and eventually I became his ghoul," she continued. "We had a relationship and he didn't want me to become Kindred. When I did he didn't take it very well."

"Controlling?" I suggested.

"That is his nature," she admitted sadly. "He left about the same time that Jason was embraced. We spent two years, you and I, alone in our own private hells."

"Together?"

"No," she told me. "You stayed in Las Vegas."

"By myself?"

"No, you were with Luke." The way she said the name made me remember that she didn't like the man at all.

"Blond, long hair," I said, remembering his picture. "Kinda cute." Actually, he reminded me a bit of Scott.

"Yes," she admitted reluctantly. "And it was after you told me about the two-thirds blood bond to him that it was decided that you would be better off coming to stay with me in Salem until the bond could be broken."

It was decided *for* Christina, obviously. I wondered if she'd told Brenda about the bond in confidence. "Who decided?"

"The clan."

It sounded like the Tremere Clan had been running Christina's life, making all kinds of decisions for her. I wondered if she'd minded their interference. I knew I would have. "Okay, so I lived with Luke in Vegas. Were we lovers?"

She shifted uncomfortably and looked away. "I really don't know that. I assume that you were. I believe that you had mentioned at some point that you were, but it is a subject that you and I disagreed on."

Probably because she agreed with the clan. I wondered if she'd been the one to suggest Christina move to Salem to get away from Luke. "I'm confused," I told her, changing the subject. "Jason was embraced and I wasn't happy about it?"

"No, actually you blamed yourself," she corrected.

"I embraced him?" I asked in surprise. "I thought he was Gangrel?"

"Not originally," she said with a weary smile. "Why don't you sit down so I can explain?"

I eyed her warily, noting that she was nearly as well armed as I was. "You're not going to shoot me again, are you?"

She stared at me in shock, despair written on her face. "Jason has been running his mouth. It was an accident."

I swear there were tears in her eyes and I felt bad that I'd mentioned it. "I didn't mean to upset you," I said quickly. "Jason said it was an accident, in fact he was a little blasé about it, which surprised me. For a guy whose supposed to be in love with his wife he didn't seem to care about her getting shot."

"You talked to him this evening?"

"Yeah," I said with a sheepish smile. "When we were supposed to be talking about strategy."

She nodded, glancing through the open door at the others who were still wrapped up in their strategy session. "Jason is in what you might call full blown tactical mode right now. He tends to get that way when the situation warrants it, like a Sabbat presence. It's not like he doesn't care, he's just focused."

I wanted to believe her, but I didn't know any of them well enough to know what was the truth and what was a lie. Perhaps with time I'd learn to trust them again, but for now I knew I'd do better believing what I saw, not what I was told.

"Try the aura reading," she suggested.

"That doesn't always work," I said with a dismissive shrug. "Sometimes I can get it, most of the time I can't." It really wasn't worth the effort until I figured out how to see them when I wanted to.

"You should try," she encouraged.

I shrugged again, but I didn't try. The fact that she wanted me to made me reluctant to try. She surprised me by moving closer and reaching for my hand. I let her take it, carefully watching every move she made. I wanted to be prepared if she tried anything involving a stake.

"Chris if you don't believe anything that any of us ever say," she said earnestly, "believe that Jason loves you and went through hell to be with you."

Glancing through the doorway at Christina's husband I wondered if I would ever remember the love she claimed he felt. He sure as hell hadn't shown any since we'd left the Sanctuary, although things were a bit of a mess at the moment. Still, if he loved me, wouldn't he be trying harder to win me over?

Brenda let go of my hand and patted my shoulder. "Anyhow, would you like a quick lesson in Thaumaturgy?"

Not surprisingly the thought didn't even appeal to me. "I don't know about that, but I have a question," I told her, picking up the pendant with Russian writing. "You said this was the Salubri clan symbol. Why is that a bad thing?"

"The Salubri were one of the original thirteen clans," she explained. "Our clan founder was originally a mage. He searched for a way to gain immortality, and found it through Kindred blood. In an effort to make himself stronger, he diablerized Salot, their clan founder. Our clans have been at war ever since, and most of the Salubri are believed to have been destroyed."

"So I really was a bad girl," I murmured dryly, "doing something good for a bad guy."

"Well, at this point I would take things with a grain of salt," she warned me. "It's quite obvious that your head has been messed with. The picture that you showed me earlier is a prime example of that."

"Marcus, you said," I replied thoughtfully. "Where was it I knew him?"

"You knew him as a mortal in Helena," she told me, watching my face. "He was your first love."

Helena sounded familiar to me, and after a moment I remembered why. I picked up the class ring that was hanging from my neck and looked at it. The initials 'MAT' were quite clear on side of the ring.

Brenda saw my movement and moved a little closer. "May I?" she asked softly. When I nodded, she held the ring and stared down at it intently. After a moment she let it fall back among the other necklaces I was wearing. "What is it with all the hardware, anyway?"

I shrugged. "I didn't feel safe without my guns."

"No, I mean the jewelry," she said, trying not to smile. "Did you have all of that on you when you woke up?"

"Yeah." I looked at her in surprise. "Didn't I normally wear it?"

"God, no," she exclaimed.

I picked up the pendant that had the Salubri clan symbol engraved on it. "I can read this, did I know Russian?"

"Yes, I believe Lena taught you," she replied with a smile.

"The redhead with the baby." Her picture had been in the photo album.

"Yes," she agreed, smiling. "That is your godson."

The list of people Christina was responsible for kept getting longer and longer. If I didn't remember them, how was I supposed to protect them? "What in the hell is a vampire doing as a godmother?"

"You saved Lena's life and returned her to her home and boyfriend," she explained. "And because the two of you became very close when Jason disappeared."

"You make me sound like I'm some kind of Supergirl," I muttered with a frown.

She smiled indulgently. "You tend to have causes."

What the hell was that supposed to mean? "Like save the baby whales?"

"No, save people that care about you," she told me. "People that you care about."

Thinking about how I liked to keep Petor close to me, I had to smile. "Yeah, I think I have a tendency to be a little overprotective."

"You tend to blame yourself," she added sadly. "You blame yourself for Jason's embrace and Lena's abduction."

I wondered what she wasn't telling me. "Is it my fault?"

"No, how could it be?" she asked. "You didn't take them. Malcolm had something to do with it. He took Jason, he took Lena to the alternate reality."

"I don't understand that," I said, shaking my head in confusion, "but let's just skip that topic because I don't get it."

She nodded and changed the subject. "What else are you wearing?"

Brenda didn't recognize most of the rest of my jewelry as those that Christina normally wore. She did tell me that the small silver cross had been given to her sister in Italy after Jason had been abducted. She also had a theory about how I ended up with a man's wedding ring that matched Jason's.

"It seems like you told me about a hand that had been cut off a body that Lena received at the holding," she said, confirming Jason's tale earlier. "It was a man's hand and it had a ring on it, like Jason's. Maybe somehow this Malcolm guy got a hold of it. Of course it's not like it's a one of a kind piece, maybe he just grabbed another one."

There was no telling how it had gotten around my neck. "Spooky-boo," I suggested.

She smiled. "At least you haven't lost that. I think you picked up that term from Jason, it's what he calls the blood magic stuff."

At that moment, Rafe came to the doorway and smiled at Brenda. "Just making sure everything's okay," he said softly before returning to the others.

"Is he afraid that I was going to stake you or that you were going to stake me?" I asked Brenda.

"I think he just wanted to make sure that Michael wasn't in here," she replied with a sad smile.

I knew that there was more to the story that she was telling me, but it wasn't any of my business so I didn't ask. I did ask about something else that had been bothering me. "What's the deal with Antonio anyway? I know he found me in Las Vegas with no memory, but, I mean, how well do I know him?"

"Well, you lived in the same city with him for the first five years of your existence as a Kindred," she explained. "He taught you and you were together. You had a good relationship."

I raised an eyebrow at that. "We were *together*?"

"No," she said quickly, smiling. "He and Idella have been an item for years. Although of course they don't admit it. He went to LA for a while and acted as Tremere primogen."

"So who's this Dougal guy?" I still didn't understand where he fit into the picture. If he was Christina's sire, why hadn't he 'raised' her?

"I never met the man," she admitted. "I didn't even know of his existence until Cormac Brennan came to town."

"The rude guy." It seemed that if I wanted answers about my sire I would have to call him.

"He can be rather brusque when he wants to be," she said carefully. "His people skills aren't the best but I have to admit that since he found Eliza again he has changed a great deal. He and I got off on the entirely wrong foot."

"Each other's?" I asked dryly.

"Yeah." She looked like there was more she wanted to say about that, but apparently changed her mind. "There is one thing I know about Dougal Galloway. His blood apparently has some quality to it that when he embraced someone he lost the memories of his life, because Cormac suffered the same lack of memory that you did, but for some reason, he actually chose to keep Cormac on as a childe whereas you were left in an alleyway. Antonio found you and took you in."

I was left in an alley, alone. Obviously Dougal hadn't cared enough for me to make sure that I survived. "Oh."

"You didn't know the ways of the Masquerade or the Camarilla," she continued softly. "You didn't know to present yourself to the prince and when Antonio saw you and recognized you as a new Kindred in the city and questioned you on your lack of Kindred skills, he realized that you didn't know what you were supposed to do."

At least someone had cared enough to look after me. "He took me in and he took Michael in," I repeated, "did he take you in?"

"No, I am his actual blood childe," she explained. "He offered the embrace to me and we went to Vienna where I was embraced before the Council of Seven. They are the ruling elders of the Tremere clan."

I wasn't sure what that meant, but it sounded important. "What's this thing about blood bonded to the clan?"

"All Tremere are blood bound to the clan," she said quite seriously. "Have your new friends told you of the Masquerade?"

"I knew that one," I admitted. "There are words I recognize, like prince and primogen and such. There were a few terms I was a little vague on, but they made sure I knew what was what so I didn't do something stupid."

She nodded, looking a little relieved. "Because we are not of the original thirteen clans, we are loyal to the clan first, then the city we reside in."

I didn't understand how a clan could take precedence over everything else. Protecting family and friends were much more important, but perhaps she felt the clan was her family.

"As far as you not being bound to the clan now," she continued with a frown, "it must be part of the magic that was performed on you. When I performed the blood walk on you a year ago you were bound to the clan. You were bound to the clan when you were embraced. It is something that is done to every Tremere right after the embrace when you take your clan vows."

I sat there wondering if there was some way they could still be wrong. If magic could erase a blood bond, couldn't it recreate one too? I didn't want to be who they said I was. Christina sounded weak to me and I didn't want to be weak.

She reached out very slowly and brushed a strand of my hair behind my ear. "I wish that you could remember us," she said softly, her voice catching. "But if you never remember, then I guess we'll just have to make new memories."

I looked away, not quite willing to tell her that I honestly didn't care whether I remembered any of them or not. I settled for telling her part of the truth. "I wish I could remember what was so dangerous." At least then I would be better able to protect my friends.

Her eyes were swimming with blood red unshed tears. "I wish you could too so that we could make it better."

I didn't want her to make anything better for me. I'd been happy with the pack until the Salem crew showed up and interfered in my life. While the evidence pointed to me being the woman they claimed I was, I really had no reason to trust them even if I wanted to. I knew I had been running from something, and it might well have been the perfect family that had come to Detroit to find their lost Christina.

"You paint this picture of a happy life in Salem," I told her slowly, "and I want to believe you, I do." For my own safety and that of those I was responsible for I just couldn't trust them blindly.

"Chris," she said softly. "I understand."

I closed my eyes for a moment at the unfamiliar name that I was quickly becoming to hate. The fact that she continued to use it told me that she didn't understand, not at all. "My name is Tina," I said firmly, meeting her eyes with a calm and even look.

Blood tears spilled from her eyes and ran down her cheeks. I wanted to wipe them away and tell her that everything would be all right, but I just didn't know if that was true and I didn't want to lie to her.

"I know you've been through hell," she whispered brokenly, "but the only thing that's keeping me together is the hope that someday you'll remember who you are. I don't know if I can call you by that name. You're my sister, you're Chris."

I stiffened, shaking my head at her obstinacy. How could I even begin to build a relationship with these people when they wouldn't even call me by my name? "I can only be who I am, and I'm Tina."

She stood and walked a few feet away, turning her back to me and wiping at the tears on her face. I understood her distress, but she was wrong. I didn't know how to be the sister she loved, I wasn't even sure I wanted to be. I got up and was halfway to the door before I realized that I desperately wanted to change her mind.

"I don't know if I can ever be the person that you want me to be," I told her sadly, turning around to look at her. "I don't know if that is still in me, but if you can accept me for who I am, not who I was, maybe we can rebuild that perfect family that you paint such a pretty portrait of. Just don't expect me to change."

She simply stood there with her back to me without responding to my words. I'd said all I could, if she couldn't accept me for who I was, it was her loss not mine. I'd told her the how I felt and it was up to her to deal with it.

"I'm sorry," I whispered before going to join the others in the main room.

## Games People Play

It seems like every time I try to make it right  
It all comes down on me  
Sherif Crow - I Shall Believe

Thankfully it was only a few hours before dawn and the pack was nearly ready to go. During some last minute discussion, I realized that Frasier intended to come with us, had in fact picked up the bag that was sitting near the door.

I glanced at Madelynne, but she just shrugged as if to say it was my call.

"I don't think so," I said softly. While I didn't know how far I could trust him, there was another reason I wanted him to stay behind.

"Tina," he began, but I cut him off.

"Not yet, I need you here, tonight at least," I told him in a low voice. "I need you to keep an eye on them and find out what they're planning to do if I don't get my memory back."

He glanced at Brenda, a calculating look in his eye. "I don't think you'd like what they have planned," he said softly. "You're right, I'll stay here today."

"Maybe tomorrow night you can come with us," I added. "There aren't a lot of accommodations at the pub, I wouldn't want you to have to sleep on the floor."

"I'll sleep anywhere you want me to," he vowed, looking down at me intensely.

The trust and affection in his eyes touched something inside of me and I had to stop myself from groaning aloud. While the last thing I needed was someone else to take care of, it looked like I had another name to add to my list. At least this one seemed capable of taking care of me right back.

In the car I asked what Madelynne thought about Frasier joining our group.

"I trust him more than the rest of them," she replied. "He's your ghoul, if you want him with you then he's welcome."

I breathed a mental sigh of relief that I wouldn't have to convince her to let him join us. I already felt like leaving him behind tonight had been the wrong thing to do, I didn't know if I could do it again.

It didn't take long to get back to the pub. Most of the pack stayed on the second floor talking about how our meeting had gone, but I was too restless for that. I made my way to the roof and stood overlooking the city. The wind was chill, but it didn't bother me.

After a while I realized that I wasn't alone. When I turned to look at Scott, he moved close enough for me to reach out and touch, although I didn't, not yet.

"Worried?" he asked softly.

Jason had been at the forefront of my mind, but I wasn't sure I liked admitting it. "I guess they proved it, didn't they?" I replied with a shrug. "He says he loves me, but he hasn't shown it. Then again, maybe he just married me for my money."

The thought that he had married me for any reason other than love made me feel sick to my stomach. I was quickly getting in over my head with Jason, and sure as hell didn't like it.

"You?" Scott prompted.

"I don't remember," I said in a low voice. I moved closer until my cheek was resting against his chest. "I must have felt something for him if I'd married him, right?"

Without saying a word, he put his arms around me comfortingly.

"I feel something when I'm around him," I admitted reluctantly, "but I wouldn't call it love. I don't know what it is." I closed my eyes and rested in the circle of his arms. Part of me was grateful to be there where I felt safe, but another part was wishing he were Jason.

That day when the sun found me alone in my bed I dreamed of being lost in a maze, blind and helpless. I wandered for days, searching for a way to the center, while all around me familiar voices cried out for aid. In the dream I knew who the voices belonged to, but when I woke I couldn't name them.

Shortly after sundown Jason called me. "How are things going tonight so far?"

"Things are fine but it's early yet." Had he expected the Sabbath to attack us tonight?

"Did your people find anything on the Sabbath yet?"

"I haven't had a chance to check." I'd only been up half an hour myself. "What's up on your end?"

"Nothing yet," he told me. "I was just checking to see what you found. We need to know who we're looking for, I was hoping that you guys had it."

"We had some names," I reminded him.

"When you get it, could you fax it over to me?" he asked. He gave me the number, then added, "As soon as you find anything out let us know, then we can get back to actually getting you back."

I was afraid I knew what he meant, but I had to make sure. "Getting me back where?"

"Getting you back to where you should be," he told me, "knowledge wise, memory wise, back with us, hopefully."

"Whatever," I mumbled. He could hope, I was quite happy where I was. "What do you plan on doing once you have the information on the Sabbath?"

"Then we'll decide what to do as a group," he replied. "We can't be too separated because we don't know who they're looking for."

That was one thing I could agree with him on. Michael was freaked, but we had no guarantee he was the target. "How's Frasier doing?" I asked. "He okay?"

"He's still sleeping," Jason told me.

That seemed strange, but I had no reason to doubt him. "Okay. I guess we'll call we get some information."

"Thanks hon," he said softly. "Love ya."

I still didn't know how to respond to that. "Okay," I replied awkwardly. "Bye."

The pack and I spent an hour or so looking for the Sabbath. Howard was checking the larger hotel chains, while I offered to call some of the seedier hotels in town to see if any of those names came up. Madelynne had Alex and Emily do the same.

Unfortunately, we didn't find anyone using the names we'd come up with, but I did get a few offers for a date. I turned them down as nicely as I could. I had quite enough men in my life already, I didn't need any more complications.

Howard eventually found a large hotel downtown that had rented an entire floor to one individual. That same person had rented five cars from four different rental agencies. It sounded suspicious enough to warrant investigation, however Madelynne wanted to wait until we had more information.

Gregory Vine had been a busy man the night before. First he'd rented a dark blue cargo van and a hunter green convertible Cougar from Enterprise, then he'd moved on to National Car rental where he'd picked up a black Mustang. Next he'd gone to Hertz and rented a silver truck, then to Alamo where they'd given him a black touring sedan. Last but not least he'd gone to the hotel downtown and checked in.

I asked Howard if he would check a few things for me when he had time. I wanted to see who Christina had been calling on the phone I had, and I wanted to know if there was a way to get access to the credit cards that were in her name. If I really was her, there was no reason I couldn't use her money.

Madelynne, Logan, Scott and I went through the store of weapons on site and made sure that everyone was more than prepared for battle this evening. Looking at my meager selection of clothing I suggested we go on a shopping trip. Howard seemed pleased with the idea, and gave us a list of things for us to pick up.

We decided to head for the Oakland Mall simply because you couldn't buy leather pants at Meijer. There were a number of other things we couldn't get there either, the items on Howard's list, and a cell phone for Petor.

The mall wasn't busy that late at night, and we had no trouble getting what we needed. Petor liked the style of our western clothing, and Scott seemed to like the clothes that I chose for myself. I made sure to get at least one tee shirt with a high neckline in case we had to spend time with the Salem group. It wouldn't do for me to accidentally drive Christina's husband away with my crosses until I was sure that was what I wanted to do.

I have to admit that the rest of what I bought was a bit revealing, but that's what I felt most comfortable in. Besides, I liked the intensity in Scott's eyes when he saw me in skintight black leather and a stomach baring baby tee.

We were nearly done shopping when Howard called Madelynne with some information. Gregory Vine was apparently a businessman from California, an investment stockbroker. He hadn't been on the business charter the Sabbath had come in on, but he had flown out from LA within hours of when Michael had left the city.

"Howard says he gets his mail in Sacramento," Madelynne told us once she'd hung up. "He's into a lot of tree hugging stuff and from what Howard has come up with, he's probably not Kindred."

"Did he check on the things I asked him to?" I inquired.

"He says he has that list of calls you wanted," she replied. "He's still working on the credit cards."

I nodded. As much as I wanted him to hurry, I knew the Sabbath invasion took precedence over me having money in my pocket.

We had just walked away from Radio Shack and were on the way to the car when my phone rang. I muttered an irritated curse under my breath at the interruption as I'd been trying to program Petor's new number into my phone.

"Do you know anyone in the area with computer knowledge?" Brenda asked once I answered.

"Yeah," I said reluctantly.

"Could they run a plate for me?"

At least she was asking, not demanding. It was a start. "I could ask Howard to." I got a pen from Madelynne and wrote the license plate number down on a bag. After repeating it out loud, I asked if it was a lead on the Sabbat.

"Yes, I need it as soon as possible," she answered.

"I'll check it and call you back," I assured her. "Hey, how's Frasier doing?" While I didn't feel the absolute necessity to look after him that I did for Petor, I still wanted to make sure he was safe.

"I don't know," she told me coolly. "He's not with me."

There was a lie in the first part of her words that was so obvious I could taste it. "You don't know how he is," I repeated. "Do you know where he is?"

"He's with Jason."

That didn't necessarily mean that he was safe, but I wasn't going to call her on the lie. "All right, I'll call you back when I have the info." Maybe I would, anyway. Lie for lie.

"Thank you," she replied.

"You're welcome," I said coolly before hanging up and turning to Madelynne. "Brenda has this license plate number she thinks is a lead."

Madelynne looked at the number thoughtfully for a moment. "Isn't that one of the plate numbers Howard gave us?"

It seemed like she was right, but I couldn't remember exactly. I was a little distracted with concern over Frasier and once we were on our way to the Pub I decided to call him and make sure he was all right. When he answered his phone, he sounded a little stressed.

"How are you?" I asked.

"A little tense," he admitted, not sounding much relieved.

"Problem?"

"Thought so."

"But you thought wrong?"

"Long story," he murmured. "Maybe I'll tell you when I come to stay with you."

I ignored the hint but he was right, I had to bring him to the pub. He was my ghoul, I couldn't trust his safety to anyone else. "Where are you?"

"Headed for the Rattlesnake downtown," he told me. "We're following Michael."

"I don't suppose you could accidentally shoot him or anything," I said dryly.

After a moment's pause, he offered, "If you want me to."

While it was nice to know that he'd follow orders, that wasn't such a good idea. Michael was an irritating bastard, but at some point he'd been Christina's friend. "Probably not," I assured him. "I'll wait until he gets a little more annoying, if possible. Anyway, I was just checking on you, Brenda was being vague about how you were when I talked to her. I just wanted to make sure you were all right."

"Okay." He sounded confused, which made two of us.

"Look, maybe later on tonight we could get together," I said softly. "I'm not sure I like Brenda and Jason watching over you."

"I'm fine," he told me, "but I'd be better with you."

After we rung off his words echoed through my mind. If he was my ghoulish as the countess had said, wasn't he my responsibility? Didn't I have the same obligation to his health and safety as I had for Petor?

I shook my thoughts away and got Madelynn's attention. "I know that you didn't want to fill them in on everything," I said softly. "Did you want me to not call Brenda back?"

She shrugged. "Well, we really don't know that much about Gregory."

"No we don't," I agreed. "But do you want me to tell her what we know?"

She thought about it for a moment, then shook her head. "Not right now. What's going on with Frasier?"

"He said that they thought they were getting into some trouble, but they're not now," I told her. "I don't like this whole mess. I just think we should get him, I don't think he's safe."

When she asked where they were, I told her and added, "Do you think that once we get back to the pub I could borrow a car and go get him?"

She smiled. "Yeah, you could see where he is and go from there."

I gave a mental sigh of relief. "Good, I got some strange vibes off Brenda when I talked to her and I want to make sure he's safe."

Madelynn seemed to accept that. "Just him though, right?"

"Oh yeah," I assured her. "We don't need any more to worry about. I'm a little more confident about Frasier than the rest of them. But you know what, I'd really like them to stop calling me Christina."

"So tell them," she suggested.

"I'm going to have to," I agreed. "I tried to tell Brenda last night, but she wasn't liking it at all." I didn't like remembering her tears, but she'd brought them on herself. "She'll get over it. But if I could borrow a car I could get Frasier anyway."

"Yeah, no problem." She glanced at the truck behind us. "You can take Scott with you if you'd like. I don't want to see you and Petor go alone."

I smiled in relief. "That would be great." I didn't want to walk into their haven with just the two of us if I could help it, at least not until I knew what their intentions were. Once we got back to the pub, I called Frasier to make the arrangements. He sounded even more tense than he had last time, if that were possible.

"Christina."

"Tina," I corrected him. "Where are you at?"

"Drag racing down Williams."

Of all the things I'd expected him to say, that wasn't among them. "Why?"

"Michael and Jason have—" I could almost feel the strain in his voice. "Something's happened, we don't know. The tracker stopped."

I held the receiver away from my mouth and turned to Madelynne. "I think they found the Sabbat on Williams."

She looked at me in surprise. "Who did?"

"Jason and Michael." The thought of Jason being in trouble made my mouth dry. I put the phone back to my lips. "So you guys are going to rescue them?"

"I guess."

"I'm going down to Williams to see if I can help," I told Madelynne. "Scott, you with?"

I wasn't entirely surprised to find him holding the door open patiently. I stayed on the phone with Frasier while Scott drove us toward the downtown area. I was afraid if I hung up that something bad would happen and I'd have no way of knowing about it.

Frasier explained that they had placed a tracer on Michael earlier in the evening. After he and Jason had taken off alone, the tracer had stopped working. Frasier and James were on their way toward their last known location now with Brenda and Rafe following.

"They're running this way," he said suddenly.

"Maybe you should stop and pick them up," I suggested as I heard breaks squealing. I could hear doors opening and James asking what they were running from.

I heard Jason's reply quite clearly. "Sabbat."

"Let me tell you," Michael added, "not just the Sabbat, a werewolf, an Assamite."

"He landed on my taxi," Jason announced.

"Can we get out of here please?" Frasier asked. Into the phone, he said, "We've got them."

"Are they all right?" I asked anxiously. Not that I cared about Michael, but Jason was too cute to be scarred for all eternity.

"Yeah, they look okay," he assured me.

"There's seven of them," I heard Michael say. "We can take seven."

"Oh, and a werewolf," Frasier answered disbelievingly. "I think not."

"We did it before," Jason said firmly.

"The werewolf took out the werewolf," Frasier reminded them.

Now that I knew they were safe, I felt I could get off the phone. "Where are you guys going?"

"Where are we going?" he asked.

"Let's go back to the hotel," Michael replied.

"Back to the hotel," he told me.

"Okay, then we'll meet you there."

"Okay." There was silence for a moment, then he asked hesitantly, "Are you taking me with you?"

I smiled. "Yeah."

"Okay." He sounded more than pleased when I hung up the phone.

"Sabbat?" Scott asked.

"Apparently," I replied. "They have an Assamite and a werewolf among their numbers."

"Fun," Petor murmured apprehensively, making me wonder how much he'd been exposed to supernatural beings before we'd arrived in Detroit.

I was getting ready to call Madelynne to let her know what was going on when Frasier called me back. They had decided to return to where the Sabbath had grabbed Michael in an effort to destroy them. While I couldn't agree with their reasoning, I wasn't with them to argue the point. We continued on toward the downtown area.

When I called her, Madelynne wasn't enthusiastic about Scott and I running to their rescue. "I'm not going to help them," she said bluntly.

"I realize that," I replied, "but I'd like to see the Sabbath taken care of." I wasn't sure if I wanted to help the Salem crew or not, but if we could take out the bad guys I was all for it.

"I'd like to also, but they've brought this on themselves," she reminded me. "I'm not going to help them finish what they've started. If they're after you, I'll come, but they mean nothing to me."

I understood totally and said so before ringing off. Just after we had pulled over to let several police cars go by, Frasier called me once more.

"Chr-Tina," he began, "we're going back to the hotel now."

I rolled my eyes, wishing that they'd make up their minds. "The hotel, Scott," I told him. At his irritated look, I added. "Yes, they're idiots. The hotel now."

"Can I still come with you?" Frasier asked in my ear.

"Yes," I assured him. "We'll be there soon." I hoped he be all right until we got there.

## *Hitting Bottom*

Everything I can't remember  
As fucked up as it all may seem  
Staind - It's Been Awhile

It was nearly eleven-thirty when we got to the hotel. The three of us went up to the suite not sure what to expect once we got there. Scott seemed to think we'd have trouble from the vamps for taking Frasier, but I wasn't so sure.

I knocked firmly on the door and a moment later saw a shadow pass behind the peephole. Rafe opened the door to reveal a room full of tense people. Brenda was leaning over James who was intent on a notebook computer. Jason was pacing behind the couch, and Michael was lounging in an overstuffed chair. Frasier came out of one of the bedrooms with a bag slung on each shoulder as Rafe walked toward his wife.

"Are you ready to go?" I asked him.

"Yeah," he replied quickly.

I glanced around the room at the others. "So what's up?"

"Well, I was just about ready to head down to the hotel lounge and have a drink," Michael murmured, "see if I can find more interesting company."

No one else seemed to realize I was in the room. While for the most part it didn't bother me, I could hear Jason mumbling to himself. "Should you be by yourself?" I asked Michael.

He shrugged fatalistically. "It's not going to matter."

If he wanted to meet final death it was his own damn business. "Okay, well you guys look like you're really busy, so we won't take up any of your time," I murmured. Once again, everyone ignored me. It occurred to me that Jason probably hadn't even realized I was there, and strangely enough I wanted to hear his voice. Once I moved a little closer, I could hear what he was muttering.

"Why? If they're not after him, who are they after?" he said to himself. "If they're after her, why are they after her? There's no reason for it. If he was there, and the werewolf was there."

I stepped into his path and he looked up just before he ran into me. "Do you always mumble to yourself?" I asked, trying not to smile.

"How are you?" he replied, studying my face intently.

"Great. I was just saying that y'all look busy so—" I knew it was time to go, but somehow I wanted to stay.

"Apparently the Sabbat aren't after him," he told me, gesturing toward Michael.

"How do you figure?"

"They had him, and they let him go," he said softly.

I glanced at Michael. "Is that why his suit looks wrinkled?"

Immediately the Ventrue began smoothing his suit. "I haven't had a chance to get into another suit," he said defensively. "Yours would look like this too if you landed on an old dirty cab."

Jason ignored him. "Are you sure you're secure?"

"As secure as we can be," I replied confidently. We were ready for the Sabbat if they came for us.

"You need to take care," he insisted. "I don't know if they're after you."

"Why would they be?" They'd followed Michael into town, not me.

"I don't know what's going on, but your safety comes first," he persisted. "Make sure you're some place that no one can get to you."

Would he take care of me if I let him? Would he hold me close and keep me safe from harm? I couldn't believe the pull I felt to let him do just that. I wanted to surrender myself to his strength and let him keep the big bad world away. It was hard to shrug off the temptation, but somehow I managed.

"I'll take care," I assured him, glancing at Frasier. "We're gonna go, and I'm taking him."

"Did you get anywhere on that plate Brenda asked you about?" Rafe interrupted.

"License plate?" I wasn't really ready for the question although honestly I should have been. "Um, Howard's checking on it."

From the hard expression on his face he didn't believe me. "Do you wanna tell me the whole story?"

"Howard's checking on it," I repeated firmly. "We get some information, I'll get back with you."

"You're lying," he declared.

Shame filled me, but I forced the emotion down. I couldn't see any reason to keep the information from them except that Madelynne had asked me to. These people may have been Christina's friends, but they didn't mean much to me, especially not this ghoul who was quite obviously overstepping his bounds.

"I'm out of here," I hissed, turning for the door followed closely by Frasier.

"Thanks for all your help," Rafe called after me.

I spun and looked back at him disdainfully, but my angry gaze didn't seem to affect him.

"You're supposed to be helping," he reminded me coldly. "Everybody else is in danger and you're withholding information. Thanks, have a good night."

I couldn't believe he was speaking to me that way, but then again he wasn't my concern. I forced a pleasant "Good night" back to him and walked out, anger radiating from me every step of the way. By the time we got to the car I had calmed down enough that I no longer wanted to go back and shoot him. We loaded one of Frasier's bags in the trunk, but the other he insisted on keeping on his lap.

As Scott pulled onto the street, I called Madelynne and let her know we were on our way back. Unfortunately I couldn't keep the irritation out of my voice.

"Problems?" she asked.

"They were real friendly," I murmured, sarcasm dripping from my voice.

"Well, keep in mind that it is all their fault," she reminded me. "Gregory Vine followed them here."

"Yeah." I had to wonder if Michael was in on the whole thing. It would explain why he hadn't grabbed him earlier when they'd had the chance. "One of the puppies asked about the license plate and I told them we were still checking on it. He called me a liar. I was lying, but..."

"It wasn't his place to call you on it," she added.

"Right." I looked out the window wondered how much more bullshit I'd have to deal with from the Salem crew before this mess was over and done with. "I'd like to check out that hotel."

"As soon as you get here," she assured me.

"We've got Frasier," I told her, glancing over my shoulder at him. "He's got this bag, and he says there's lots of 'toys' in it." Not that he'd told me exactly what when I'd asked.

"Bring it too, we'll take two cars," she replied.

"All right." Then because I was still a bit upset at Rafe I muttered, "I cannot believe that puppy got in my face. His mistress doesn't know how to keep him in line."

She laughed. "She needs a leash."

That made me laugh a little too and I started to relax. We said our goodbyes and I put the phone back in my pocket.

"I'm sorry Rafe went off on you," Frasier offered softly. "He's got a lot of things going on right now."

"That's no excuse," I said firmly.

"You're right, it's not," he replied, "but I'm sorry just the same."

I nodded, then looked at Scott. He was concentrating on the road, but when he felt my gaze, he glanced at me and smiled. I was glad he'd come with me to get Frasier, glad he was here with me now to help take care of my ghouls. I put my hand out and touched his arm lightly for a moment before turning to look out the windshield.

While I was thinking of questions to ask Frasier, my phone rang. I checked the caller ID, but it showed the caller was out of the area. I wasn't sure I wanted to answer it, but I did anyway. "Hello?"

"Christina?" a woman's cultured voice said hesitantly.

Great, yet another one of my alter ego's friends. I didn't have the patience for dealing with it at the moment. "Ah, I think you have a wrong number."

"This isn't Christina Kline?" she replied softly. "It sounds like you."

"Why does everybody call me that?" I muttered irritably. "I'm Tina Andrews. Who is this?"

"This is Lena," she told me. "Stockton?"

"The redhead," I said before I could think.

"Yes."

"With the baby and the werewolf," I added. "Brenda has shown me pictures."

"I'm just calling to see if you're okay."

She sounded worried, but then again who the hell wasn't worried about me? Oh yeah. Me. "I'm fine," I said tensely.

"I received a message on my answering machine yesterday," she told me. "You were calling from Russia and you couldn't call Jason."

"Wait a minute," I broke in. "I called you from Russia *yesterday*?"

"Yes," she sighed and I could tell she was as confused as I was. "This is not making any sense whatsoever."

"Okay, I'm pretty sure I was in Russia in the last week or so," I admitted, "but yesterday, I was here."

"And where are you now?"

"Detroit," I answered slowly. It wouldn't hurt anything to tell yet another person where I was, although I was damned sick of everyone asking me that question.

"I left a message with Jason and Brenda because I didn't know what was going on," she continued. "I just talked to Jason and he filled me in on the situation. I called because I wanted to make sure that you were okay."

Neither Jason nor Brenda had mentioned a call from Lena. "I'm fine, really," I assured her, wondering what else they were hiding from me. "I'm fine, and if another person asks me that, I'm going to scream."

At that moment, Frasier grinned and opened his mouth as if he were going to say something.

"Shut up, Frasier," I ordered, pointing a stern finger at him.

"Frasier is with you?" Lena asked.

"Yeah, I got Frasier because I can't trust him with Brenda."

"Why would you not trust Brenda?" she inquired, obviously confused.

"Why would I trust Brenda?" I asked coldly.

Silence burned the line for a moment before she replied. "Because I was led to believe that you trusted Brenda a great deal."

"Okay, maybe Christina did, but I don't," I snapped. I was getting damned tired of people assuming I was the Tremere clone that Christina had been. "I thought you said Jason filled you in on this?"

"Yes," she replied coolly, "but actually it's been about five minutes and I'm trying to get a grasp on this entire situation."

"Okay, let me just make it short and sweet," I told her. I didn't want to be harsh, but I didn't see any other way to get her to listen. "I don't know any of you people. I believe that Frasier's blood bound to me only because this big Tremere did a spooky-boo thing and—"

"Yes, the countess," she interrupted.

Lena knew the countess. "I don't want to know how you know the countess."

"I met her with you," she told me.

"Whatever. I met the countess?" For a moment I wanted to see a time line of Christina's life. I hated the fact that everyone seemed to know so much more about the woman that I'd apparently once been than I did. "Nobody tells me this. Anyway, everyone says that I'm this girl and I don't know—I'm not her. I am but I'm not her. This is very frustrating."

"I'm sensing that from you and Jason," she murmured sympathetically. "I wish that there were something that I could do to help."

I clenched my fist and tried for a better hold on my temper. "You know, no offense, but I don't need any help," I told her firmly. "I'm fine. I have friends and we protect each other. I have two ghouls and that's all I need."

"Two ghouls?" she asked, surprised.

"Petor." She'd obviously known Frasier, so I didn't mention him. "He's Russian."

"What is his name?"

"Petor Andrews." She could have gotten the name from Jason, so I didn't see any reason to hide it. "I'm sure that you guys have my best interests at heart, but I'm a big girl and I can take care of myself," I told her. "Maybe eventually I'll remember who I was but for now I'm good the way I am."

"It sounds as if you've chosen an unlikely path for the person that I know," she said sadly, "but it is your choice to make."

From what I could tell the person she knew had been a spineless weakling. "Well, it's better than them staking me and taking me back to Salem."

"I am sure that they are only thinking of what's best for you," she said, her voice now formal and cold.

"I know what's best for me," I insisted.

"You know what's best for everyone." For a moment her tone was warm again, affectionate.

I wanted to ask how close we'd been, how the baby was, but I forced myself to focus on the here and now. "Look, we've got big bads in town," I told her, "and I'm kinda busy, so..."

"I am sorry that you are not quite yourself in remembering who I am," she replied, her voice hard once more. "I'm sure that Christopher will regret not knowing you either. Perhaps things will work out for you, perhaps not. If I can be of assistance in any endeavor that you need, then please call. I don't know however if I'll be available. Goodbye."

As I hung up the phone I buried the feelings of guilt and hopelessness that swept over me. I didn't know Lena and I wasn't sure why her obvious hurt at my rejection pained me so much. A part of me wanted to call her back and apologize for my thoughtlessness, but I forced myself to put the phone away.

When we got back to the pub I introduced Frasier to everyone he hadn't already met, which wasn't very many of them. "You'll be sharing a room with Petor," I told him as we took his things up to the third floor.

"No problem," he replied easily. "I like him."

"I'll trade rooms with them," I told Madelynne, who was leading the way. "My room's a little bigger than Petor's."

"We've got a cot we can move in there until we can get another bed," she told me with a sidelong glance. "Unless you want to bunk with Scott."

I laughed dryly. "I'm married," I reminded her with as much sarcasm as I could muster. Actually, the idea of bunking with Scott appealed to me more than I wanted to admit. I told myself I didn't need the added complication and tried to bury the thought but it didn't want to disappear.

Thinking along those lines brought Jason's face to my mind. I wondered for the hundredth time if Christina had loved him or if she had married him because the clan had ordered her to. I hoped she had gone willingly into wedlock, but somehow I couldn't imagine it. She seemed like such a spineless creature to me.

We took the time to switch our things and give Frasier a quick tour of the building. Petor wanted to know what was in the bag Frasier wouldn't put down, and when he showed us I was amazed. The

bag was similar to the one Brenda had used for her ritual items, but this one was filled with weapons of every kind. I hid a sigh of relief that he actually did know how to take care of himself.

Madelynne called us downstairs so we could go with her and the others for a drive by of the hotel Gregory Vine was staying at. While we weren't sure what floor he'd rented, she thought one or more of the vehicles he'd gotten would be parked nearby and she wanted to check it out. We loaded into two cars and headed for downtown.

Next to the hotel was an enclosed parking garage that we didn't try to gain entrance to. To the amazement of Petor, Frasier and myself, Madelynne morphed into the figure of a small black housecat and Logan let her out of the car. She meandered back toward the parking garage and disappeared inside.

"That was pretty cool," I breathed softly.

Logan grinned. "She knows how to get around."

We waited anxiously for what seemed like a long time before she returned. When she did, Logan let her back into the car and she changed back into her normal form.

"All but the van and the sedan are in the parking garage," she told us. "The engines are cold so they've been here a while."

"Which means they're out somewhere in the city," I murmured.

"We need to talk to the prince," she told Logan. "Why don't you call Giles and make the arrangements?"

"Maybe we should have the Salem people there also," he suggested. "Maybe we can find out if Michael is in on this with the Sabbat."

"Good idea," she replied.

He pulled out his cell phone and called Giles, making arrangements for us to meet in half an hour. While he was busy, I asked Madelynne if we could have one of the other pack members rent a vehicle for me. She agreed and within minutes Alex was on his way to the airport to pick up a Suburban.

# Bad Behavior

You say those same things to me  
Over and over and over  
Default - Sick and Tired

A half-hour later we were in the prince's conference room at the Renaissance Center. Madelynne sat to the prince's right, followed by Logan, Scott and myself. Petor sat on my other side, while Frasier took the end next to senior dela Rocha. I wasn't sure why Zach was there, but I wasn't about to question the prince. Michael sat to the prince's left, followed by James, Jason, who sat across from me, Brenda and Rafe. Giles sat in the corner on a transcription machine.

"You have information?" the prince prompted of Madelynne.

"Yes I do," she replied. "First thing this evening we found out that Gregory Vine came in on a plane from San Francisco an hour and a half after Michael. He has rented an entire floor at a hotel near here. He has also rented five vehicles at four locations around town." She proceeded to give him the details of the rental companies and makes, models and license plate numbers of the cars as well as all of the information Howard had been able to gather on Mr. Vine. "We've gone to the hotel and three of the cars were there, but the sedan and the van were missing. The rest hadn't been driven in several hours, as the engines were cool. I feel that this proves that the Sabbat did not follow Tina to the city."

"Actually, they were right behind me," Michael murmured.

She looked at him smugly. "They followed him."

"But if I may, they're not here for me," he protested. "They've had their chance."

I eyed him suspiciously. There was more than one reason for them to have released him. "Or they're working with you and let you go." My words seemed to have shocked both Michael and Jason as they both stared at me as if I'd grown a third eye in the middle of my forehead.

"I wouldn't work with the Sabbat if it meant my final death," Michael replied firmly.

"Which it almost did," Brenda murmured.

"You have no idea," he continued, "but they had me and they could have put me to final rest and they didn't."

"They threw you a block and a half," Jason reminded him.

"I wasn't going to throw that in," he said hotly. "It's rather embarrassing."

I grinned at the memory of his earlier discomfiture. "Yeah, the suit was wrinkled."

"So you've had an encounter with them already," Madelynne stated. "All the more reason to believe that they're after you rather than us."

"They could have killed me," he insisted.

"Why did they not?" she asked simply.

"I don't know," he admitted. "Instead of harming me, as there were seven of them, they tossed me and took off. It was more harassment than an attack. We were trying to follow them."

"Being tossed several feet is kind of being attacked, wouldn't you say?" Madelynne drawled. "More than just harassing."

"When it's someone else, maybe," he said, making light of it, "but I'm all right."

"With seven on one, why would they simply throw him?" Jason murmured almost to himself. "If they wanted him, they had him."

"Like Tina said, maybe they're working together," Madelynne replied.

"That is preposterous," Michael exclaimed, outraged. "Tina's the one who can't remember who she is, perhaps she's in league with the Sabbat."

Jason turned to glare at him but before he could say anything Madelynne spoke up again.

"But she didn't come from LA with you," she reminded him.

"Okay, enough accusations," Brenda interrupted firmly.

Michael ignored her and turned to me. "There are enough odd little ghouls running around that you can't seem to remember making and even a chide."

"Instead of blaming everyone," Jason broke in calmly, "lets try and figure out what's going on."

"Perhaps you got your fangs into something you didn't realize you were getting into and you've endangered all of us," Michael continued insistently, glaring at me accusingly.

His venom caught me off guard and I didn't really know how to answer him because honestly he had a point. None of us knew I'd been involved with before I lost my memory, although I couldn't believe it had anything to do with the Sabbat.

Brenda stood angrily with both hands on the table. She glared down both sides of the table, demanding silence with her posture. "This is getting us absolutely nowhere," she said firmly. "Michael put himself out as bait on the streets of your city to try and draw the Sabbat out. He succeeded. They could have killed him."

"They ruined a suit," he added.

"Irregardless, they've now let the cat out of the bag and we know what they look like," she told us all. "Now we need to concentrate on them and deal with them."

"Why would they do that?" Jason asked, confused. "Why would they say 'look, here we are, come get us' unless they're in league with someone else trying to pull our attention away from Chris? Maybe they're working for the Crone or something."

Brenda nodded. "He has had Kindred ties in the past."

"I know that they were just a few hours behind me," Michael murmured, "and had I not had my own jet they probably would have been in the seat behind me."

"Think about this, Michael," Jason suggested as Brenda sat down. "They haven't bothered you for how long? Now all this has happened and you're going to come help with trying to get Christina back and her knowledge of who she is, all of a sudden they pick back up on you? There's too much evil going on here for it to be coincidence."

"Frankly I don't give a shit what they're doing here," Brenda declared, earning a harsh look from the prince. "As I've already stated, the main thing now is to deal with them. They're Sabbat, and that's the only thing we need to be concerned about."

"I think the welfare of the mortals in the city should count as well," Jason added. "Apparently they don't care about them if they attack Michael in the middle of the street. I don't want to cost human life as well. The Kine here spend enough time killing each other, we don't need to help them."

"I'm sure they don't care about a couple of people throwing each other around on the street," Michael murmured.

"Yeah, but when it's a block and a half, its a breech of the Masquerade," he said dryly. "The last thing I think the prince wants is the FBI, cops, Inquisition and whatever else here searching the city."

"I think we need to start systematically removing these bastards," Michael declared. He turned to the prince. "You have a high werewolf population in this city, have you noticed this?"

The Frenchman smiled grimly. "They all work for me."

Brenda cleared her throat. "I believe the hotel is a good place to watch for an opportunity to take them out without breaking the Masquerade, but knowing the Sabbat, they won't limit themselves to staying at a nice cushy hotel room, not when they can force themselves into people's homes and kill them horribly." She shuddered a bit, reminding me of the tale she had told us the night before.

"Depending on his lifestyle, I think he'd probably be happy in the cushy hotel room," Jason offered. "Instead of waiting for him to come to us, maybe we should go to him."

"Maybe we should ask the person that knows him the best," I suggested, looking pointedly at Michael.

"I don't know him," the Ventrue denied, "he knows me."

"Involved with him," I conceded dryly.

"I was kidnapped by him," he shot back angrily. "You've obviously forgotten who the Sabbat are, since you just were born what, a few nights ago? Since you started brand new memories, you don't know what they did or what my relationship was with them."

I'd had it with his accusations and his condescending tone. "You know, just because I have amnesia, doesn't mean I'm stupid," I informed him coldly.

"But you're still the same hardheaded Christina that you've always been," he said with a cool smile.

"My name is Tina," I barked harshly. "Get it right."

"Which is short for Christina," he reminded me. "Put it together, think about it. Tina. Christina."

"It's Tina," I shot back, coldly furious. "Use it, it's not that hard. It's fewer syllables, easier to say."

"Enough!"

We all turned in surprise to look at the prince, who was glaring at Michael and I. "The information is relevant," he told us. "The bickering is not."

"Yes, of course," Michael replied respectfully. "Maybe I have a chip on my shoulder."

"The size of Texas," I agreed under my breath. The prince heard me, and I sat back in my chair away from his chastening gaze.

"Is the countess coming this evening?" Michael asked the prince.

"The countess is occupied on other business," he replied. "She has sent senior dela Rocha in her stead as he knew Tina when she was mortal."

I turned to look questioningly at Zach, but I couldn't read the expression on his face. He gave me an encouraging smile, but there were no memories of him in my mind.

"Or rather he knew Christina... Strong when she was mortal," the prince corrected.

I recognized the last name at least, it was the same as Robert's, the man Brenda had told me was Christina's mortal brother.

"And as such, senior dela Rocha has informed me that he has an opinion on this matter," he continued.

"Thank you my prince." Zach's voice seemed much like Antonio's had been in my head. The sound of it brought to mind images of summer nights and the heat of Spain. "Yes it is true I knew Christina Strong from her breathing days. I was directly involved in her embrace."

With those simple words he managed to gain the unwavering attention of both Jason and myself.

"I first met her in Berkeley, California where she was attending college," he continued. "To make a long story short, she was embraced because of her father. Myself and a few of my clans mates, after building a relationship with her, took her to Las Vegas where she was embraced by Dougal Galloway." He smiled faintly at the name, as if he and Christina's sire had been friends. "After her embrace, Dougal, myself and my clansman from my home city left. We were assured Christina would be taken care of, placed where a responsible member of the clan would find her."

At that Zach paused, almost as if he wasn't sure if he should to continue. At last he did, looking directly at Brenda. "There were other things in Christina's mortal life, things she once wished to forget," he told her, almost daring her to contradict him. "Who is to say she did not wish to forget these things again?"

I couldn't tell what Brenda was thinking, but his words made sense to me. Christina had agreed to the embrace knowing it would erase her memory, and here I was once more a blank slate. No pain from the past could touch me now, no horror or grief from my mortal life. I'd been right to think that my amnesia protected me from something, and perhaps I knew better than to wonder what that something was. It was true that sometimes the past was best left there.

"From what I could tell, up to the point in which she disappeared, she seemed happy," Jason said sorrowfully, looking at me. "I don't think there was much more that she truthfully was looking for."

Brenda apparently agreed with him. "I really don't think that learning such information would make her subject herself to losing everything that she knew."

"What would cause that?" Jason asked of Zach. "I can understand that there are some Kindred that during an embrace will cause the childe to lose memory, but what would cause it again, after she's already Kindred?"

"It was Dougal's blood that caused it the first time," he confirmed. "I'm not certain what could have caused it again."

Brenda looked at him thoughtfully for a long moment, reading something about him that I didn't see. "So what aren't you telling us about this matter."

He met her gaze evenly as if he had nothing to hide. "What do you wish to know?"

"I get the feeling that you're leaving something out," she said softly. "I do not mean to overstep myself sir, but we are talking about life and death here."

He nodded in understanding. "There was more to the reason of her embrace, but it was not my privilege to know, and it is not my privilege to speak of it."

I felt the doors open in my mind and knew that Brenda was communicating with me even before she spoke. *Ask him about the Trimuritive*, her voice whispered into my head. *Ask if that had something to do with it.*

I raised an eyebrow at her before turning to Zach. "Senior dela Rocha," I asked hesitantly, "did the Trimuritive have something to do with... Christina's embrace?" I wasn't about to have said 'my embrace,' I still didn't quite feel like I was their Christina.

He seemed surprised at the question. "Yes, I believe it did."

Turning back to Brenda I said, "What is the Trimuritive?"

Zach turned to her as well. "Yes, please."

"Cormac took Christina to visit a friend of his, a mage in Salem of the Verbena tradition," she explained. "This woman told her that the Verbena art waxes and wanes with the Trimuritive's life."

"Wasn't there a surge or something causing problems with the magic?" Jason put in.

She nodded. "Currently the Verbena are not able to use their magic. I believe that had she been allowed to continue to learn about the Trimuritive, she would have learned that it was Malcolm. She may have believed that to be true in any case."

Jason looked a little uncomfortable at that and I wondered if Christina had shared her theories with him. Somehow I doubted it. Malcolm Robbins might have once been her mentor but he definitely was Jason's enemy.

"That is a very good theory," Zach murmured.

"Wasn't something said about the magic perishing if the Trimuritive was destroyed?" Jason asked thoughtfully.

"I believe you are right," Brenda replied.

"Do we want them to lose their magic?" Michael asked.

She shook her head. "I wouldn't want to be responsible for that."

*Does this answer your question?* I asked Brenda softly.

*Not entirely,* she answered with a wary look at Zach.

Wondering what she suspected Zach of, I closed the mental connection with Brenda and looked once more to the end of the table. "So you're saying that there were reasons that Christina chose to be embraced in such a way that she would lose her memory."

"Yes," he replied.

"Who am I to argue with Christina?" I murmured dryly. "Perhaps she learned something that made her want to forget again."

"As I've stated before, I don't think that Christina could have learned anything that would make her want to forget her entire life," Brenda said firmly, "not after what she went through to be with Jason."

Michael gave me a pitying smile. "Honey, I tell you, you're going to have one hell of a headache when you wake up from all this."

"I have one now," I muttered darkly.

"And one too many ghouls," he added smugly.

I laid my hand over Petor's where it lay near me on the table. Michael's ceaseless badgering was growing more than tiresome, but before I could say anything, Brenda shot him a harsh look.

"Quit goading her," she ordered irritably.

"I'm not goading," he denied. "It's a sad fate considering that we are still under threat of the Sabbat, and when the Sabbat are in town they are our main concern." He looked at me apologetically. "I think that by continuing to push Tina toward some decision we are just pushing her away. We should just let her have her space and trust that she will be safe among those she has chosen and just pray that if they are here for Christina, that we get to them before they get to her."

"I refuse to let Tina be used for bait," Jason bit out.

"Oh, I don't want to use her for bait," he assured his friend. "I just think that she's independent."

If Jason was going to concede enough to call me by name, the least I could do was meet him half way. "Perhaps, Micky," I said to Michael, deliberately shortening his name, "senior dela Rocha knows of a way that we can return part or all of my memory."

"We are working on it," the gentleman in question said, "as are several other chantries and agencies."

"As well as mages," Brenda added.

"Mr. dela Rocha," Jason asked softly, "what would cause the removal of the bond to the Tremere Clan, yet not remove any of the other blood bonds with Luke, or Frasier?"

"I'm not bound to Luke, that was broken," I reminded him irritably. He was fast losing what little ground he'd gained a few moments ago. "Brenda's got a list."

"It is possible through some of the human arts to remove bonds," Zach murmured after a slight pause. "It is a long arduous and dangerous process that would require time and energy."

"Would it possibly be within a three to four day period?" I inquired.

He nodded thoughtfully. "That would be sufficient time. As I said it would require a great deal of energy, possibly more than one mage."

"That would explain the flux of the Verbena," Jason murmured thoughtfully. He turned to Zach to explain. "Before Christina left she said there was a surge in the Verbena power, then it was gone as if it had never existed. Chris asked Cormac to check with his mage friends and he was checking in on it for her."

It occurred to me suddenly that Zach seemed to wince at every mention of Cormac. "You don't like Cormac?" The look he gave me told me I was right. I smiled, liking him better for having confirmed my assessment of Christina's brother. "He's rude."

"Yes, but he gets the job done," Jason insisted. "He's a good guy."

"He's rude," I repeated with a shrug.

"A surge is temporary and short lived," Zach said, ignoring the subject. "This would take sustained power. And as Mrs. Brown has pointed out, the Verbena are powerless."

"Would the surge be smaller if perhaps there were another spell being used at the same time to travel back in time?" Brenda mused.

He shrugged apologetically. "I am not experienced with time travel."

"Neither am I," she murmured.

I moved restlessly, irritated by the change of topic. "I'm sorry, how did we get back on the subject of my memory? Weren't we discussing the Sabbat?"

"Wait a minute," Jason said urgently. "If there were a surge and the Crone is of the same tradition, then he's powerless right now. He knows that we can take him now, so he throws this out by a mage of another tradition to pull us away from his trail until he can regain his power." He looked to Brenda for confirmation. "Is that a possibility? Because we're no longer home, he can do whatever he wants now, regain power, regain ability while we're out trying to get Christina's memory back."

I arched an eyebrow in surprise. "He lives in Salem?" Somehow I didn't think these people would have let him live this long if he tarried that close to their havens.

"I'm not sure where he's at," Jason admitted, "but he's been there numerous times. Usually either torturing, beating or making you bleed in some shape or form. If he's powerless and knows that we can get to him now."

Something about the way he said that made me think he was lying. Why would the Crone treat me so badly in Salem yet place me in Detroit to protect me? Something wasn't right here, and I had no way to tell what it was.

When they started squabbling amongst themselves and I sat back and rolled my eyes. It seemed to me that we weren't getting anywhere here, all they wanted to concentrate on was their precious Christina and I was damned sick of hearing about their paragon of virtue. I leaned back and caught Madelynne's eye behind Logan and Scott. "Do we have to stay here any longer?" I whispered. To my relief, she shook her head no.

"The first thing that we have to do before we can concentrate on what may or may not happen with her is find the Sabbat," Brenda said as Madelynne came to her feet.

"That is all the information we have," she told the prince. "If we may be excused, we would like to go now."

"By all means," he agreed.

## Strange Bedfellows

And it hurts to want everything  
And nothing at the same time  
Michëlle Branch - Goodbye to You

We rose to leave the conference room, but had barely turned toward the door when the prince's voice stopped us.

"If you think you need to leave."

"We're not getting anything done here," she replied respectfully. "We're just arguing."

"I find it interesting that we're throwing out all these ideas and once we get back to the Crone they're leaving," Jason complained. "Are you protecting him in any way shape or form?"

"I don't even know who you're talking about," Madelynne shot back disdainfully.

"Supposedly," he murmured. "You've been blaming poor Michael here about this whole Sabbat thing going on, how do we know you're not harboring her for him?"

"One, don't know who it is," she told him hotly. "Two, this is my city, don't you think I'd be in trouble already? Don't you think he'd know?" she demanded, gesturing toward the prince.

"We don't know," Jason insisted. "If her mind has been tampered with, how do we know someone else's hasn't been?"

"If you want to do something, get up and let's go," she replied impatiently. "If not, bitch and argue amongst yourselves, I don't care. We're not going to get anything done sitting here arguing, talking about Christina's past life. We're going."

"The whole key to the Sabbat may be based within this," he shot back. "Every time we bring it up you leave. Every time we get focused on something that might jar her memory, you want to go do something else. Why?"

I sat down, disgusted. As much as I didn't want to sit here and listen to their bullshit, I knew that if we left now they would never trust Madelynne or the pack. I hated being caught between Madelynne's rock and the hard place that was Christina's past.

"We shouldn't push the memory thing any further," Michael suggested.

"It may not be the memory," Jason insisted.

To my surprise, Scott spoke up. "I don't like your tone, boy," he growled toward Jason. I reached up to lay a hand on his arm hoping to calm him down before he went after Christina's husband. I could feel the tension riding just under his skin and knew it wouldn't take much more to set him off.

"We need to figure out what's going on," Jason continued, ignoring the danger that stood by my side. "I'm not trying to blame you, all I'm saying is that instead of getting up and going, lets put everything on the table and not get upset."

"I haven't heard anything new," Madelynne said firmly. "I've heard the same things over and over. I understand. Now, the Sabbat are in the city, they need to be taken care of. We're not going to take care of them sitting here discussing the same thing. We know the hotel where they are, we've been there. We know which cars they had, we have the plate numbers. You've obviously seen them. What good is it doing to sit here and talk about it?"

I wanted to stand up and applaud, but I kept to my seat. I really didn't want to encourage Scott's aggression, and I'd been chastised enough this evening by the prince.

"I've seen a few of them before," Jason told her, "and they were not as easy to find as they were here. They want us to find them."

"Great," I interrupted impatiently. "Find them and kill them."

"Why do they want us to find them?" he demanded.

I didn't really have an answer for that one. "So we can kill them?"

Jason smiled affectionately at me. "Now that's your attitude, I remember that."

"Because Roger is arrogant," Zach suggested, sounding very sure of himself.

Brenda looked in his direction. "Have you had dealings with Mr. Campbell before?"

"A long time ago, yes," he admitted.

"Is there any new light that you can shed upon this subject?" she asked.

"His arrogance is his weakness," he replied cryptically.

"Then we're wasting time," Michael declared.

"Thank you!" I exclaimed. "That's the first decent thing you've said in two nights."

"I don't feel like being decent," he replied with a dry smile. "I just feel like killing someone."

"Then let's go," Madelynne suggested eagerly.

"And it will take all of us to take them," he added reasonably. "We should call a truce."

"A truce would require both sides to stop making accusations, Micky," I offered, looking pointedly at Jason. Then I looked apologetically at Brenda who seemed to be waiting for something from me. "Myself included," I added.

"Then let's excuse ourselves and go to the hotel," Michael agreed.

Brenda turned to the prince. "Is there something that can be done by your inside people in the city to seal off this floor in the hotel?"

"Maybe get some of the mortals out," Jason added.

"We do have the Masquerade to consider," she continued. "We can't just storm something and not expect there to be some repercussions."

"What hotel is it?" the Frenchman inquired. When Madelynne gave him the name of the hotel once more, he murmured, "Yes, I know some of the board of directors."

"So there won't be a problem if we head over there and see what we find?" Brenda asked.

"Give me an hour to make the arrangements," he cautioned.

She nodded. "We can wait here to assure everyone that no one has any side motives going on."

"Are you accusing me of something?" Madelynne demanded angrily. "If you are then you need to say it."

"No, as a matter of fact I'm trying to assure you that no one will be contacting the Sabbat," she said calmly.

Madelynn nodded grudgingly, accepting her words. "If we are going out, I would like to go back to my place to prepare."

"Would you give consent for someone from the prince to go get the stuff so we will remain together?" Jason asked.

"Maybe Alex could bring the vehicle here," I suggested quietly when Madelynn made no move to agree. She nodded, albeit reluctantly. As she pulled out her cell phone to call him, I added, "Perhaps the prince has somewhere that we can wait the hour out."

Jason turned to the Frenchman. "May we use the waiting room outside?"

"There is an apartment a few floors down," he offered. "Giles will show you to it, you may wait there."

It didn't take long for us to follow Giles to the elevator and ride down to the floor the apartment was on. Brenda lingered in the hall with Zach for several moments before joining us, and when she did she seemed more pensive than before.

The Salem group and Michael stayed on the right side of the living room while the rest of us gathered on the left. Somehow we'd managed to gain the couch, and I sat down between Scott and Petor tried to assure myself that we would all make it through the attack we had planned. I didn't really want to take the ghouls into the line of fire, but I knew they wouldn't accept any orders to stay out of it.

Jason spent several minutes trying inconspicuously to catch Frasier's eye, but since I'd been watching the Gangrel, I saw every movement he made. I ignored his actions until Frasier finally saw them and turned to me.

"Hey, do you mind if I talk to Jason for a couple of minutes?" he asked softly.

I glanced across the room at the man, wondering what he wanted to talk about. "Are you sure you want to talk to him?"

"It's okay," he assured me.

I could feel the tension in Scott and I knew that if it were up to him, Frasier wouldn't go anywhere near Christina's husband. However it wasn't his choice, and I wanted to see what it was that Jason wanted from my ghoul. "Take care," I said softly.

Frasier nodded and followed Jason into the kitchen. I'd figured out the night before that I could dial in on conversations that were that far away from me, so I did my best to listen in. I didn't catch everything that was said as there was other talk going on in the room, but I caught enough to know that Jason was concerned about my well being. He also didn't like Frasier using the name Tina, but I found my ghoul's answer more than satisfactory.

"She told me to call her Tina," he insisted. "What am I going to do, look at her and tell her no? Then she dominates me and I have to anyway."

I made a mental note to see if I actually did have Dominate, and continued to listen to their conversation.

Frasier actually did a pretty good job of defending the pack in general and Madelynn and Petor in particular. To my surprise, he thought that Jason should be worried about my relationship with Scott, but Christina's husband seemed unconcerned. Frasier even went so far as to tell him that he should spend some time to talk to me, but Jason refused.

About that time Alex arrived with the keys to the Suburban he'd rented and I lost track of the conversation. He also had some things that Madelynne had asked him to bring, but unfortunately Howard had been unable to get any further information on the Sabbath pack. Madelynne sent him back to the pub in Scott's truck, and as Frasier rejoined us we began checking our weapons.

Not long after, the door opened and three men came in. They were dressed all in black combat attire, complete with combat boots and vests, and each of them were armed to the hilt.

"Looks like you're here to join the fun," Michael called to them.

"Ready to go?" the one in front asked.

Jason stood. "Let's go."

We rode together in the elevator once more, down below the main floor of the building this time. The doors opened on a subterranean level I'd never have guessed was there. All of our vehicles were parked nearby waiting for us, as were many other people dressed the same as the men who had come to the apartment for us.

"Did you know about this?" I asked Madelynne softly. She shook her head no.

My party climbed into the black Suburban Alex had left for us, while the Salem crew and Michael took another vehicle that had been readied to carry them. The rest of the people climbed into two remaining Suburbans and we were on our way.

# Fools Rush In

I'm armed  
And ready to die  
The Cardigans---War

It didn't take long for us to drive through the nearly empty streets of Detroit to the hotel that was our target. The whole area around the building was cordoned off, with more people dressed in black holding the perimeter. In short order we were inside and on our way up to the fourteenth floor.

When we stepped out of the stairway there were two men waiting for us. They had key cards for the rooms on that floor and automatic weapons. The Salem group had come up the stairway opposite from us, and a similar party met them.

There were eight rooms on this floor, seven guestrooms and a maid's closet. We had decided earlier to split into groups and hit as many rooms as possible at one time before turning our attention to the other rooms. The ghouls at the doors to the stairs handed out passkeys for the doors.

For the first time I opened the communications link with Brenda. *It occurs to me that these rooms may be booby-trapped*, I warned her.

*Agreed*, she returned.

*Maybe we shouldn't just open doors and go in*, I suggested. *Although maybe if we let Michael—*

While I was willing to risk the Ventrue, apparently she was not. *That's not what we normally do.*

I barely stopped myself from reminding her that I had no idea what it was we normally did.

Wordlessly we distributed ourselves to cover as many rooms as possible. Brenda and Rafe took a room closest to the steps they'd come up, as did James and Jason, while Michael took the room next to Brenda's. Logan and Madelynn teamed up for the door closest to the steps we'd climbed, while Petor and I took the room opposite. Scott and Frasier ended up at the door of the room next to ours, and the ghouls that had come with us from the prince's took the door across from them. The only door that wasn't covered was the maid's closet.

Very carefully I slid the key card into the door and turned to watch one of the boys for the signal. It wasn't long in coming. I pulled the key out and threw open the door, as did all of the other groups. Inside the room was dark and very quickly I turned the light switch on. As it registered that the room was empty of occupants, I heard a loud commotion coming from the other end of the hall.

Turning, I saw that furniture had been thrown through the door Jason and James were standing on either side of. I could hear gunfire echo down the hall as I sprinted in their direction. Both men were firing into the room, and past them I could see Michael jump over Brenda's head and enter the room she and Rafe had chosen to cover.

Frasier turned as I sprinted past him, but I was quicker than most in the hall as I'd used blood to make myself faster. I'd gotten within ten feet of Jason when the door to the maid's closet burst open and a werewolf in big furry form stepped into the hallway. Without hesitation, I fired at it, as did many others in the hall.

I could hear automatic gunfire from both ends of the hallway, and the sound of Petor's hand cannon behind me, along with the echo of several other firearms. In minutes the creature was nothing but a messy carcass on the floor.

Scott sprinted past me into the room the gunfire was coming from and before I could follow, Jason moved into my way. I stuck close behind him and in only minutes all of the bad guys were decomposing on the floor.

A quick sweep of the other rooms showed that they had once been occupied, but were empty now. Michael had ended up on the ground outside of the hotel although he seemed to be okay and eventually rejoined us none the worse for wear.

He was able to identify all of the Kindred we had destroyed as well as the werewolf in the hall. Unfortunately there were still two vampires and a ghoul unaccounted for, and there was a definite lack of luggage on the floor. The only thing of value that we found was a bit of money on the bodies.

Brenda finally voiced the obvious. "This wasn't their haven."

"It was just the visual one," Jason agreed. "It was too easy to find them."

"Yeah, but it had to be checked out, Jason," she replied calmly. "You know that."

I walked up to them as they stood in the hall talking. "Are you okay?"

Jason ran a hand down his chest, but he appeared unharmed. "Yeah, I'm okay."

"We won this time," Brenda said carefully.

I grinned. "We came, we saw, we kicked ass."

"Now that sounds familiar," Jason drawled with an answering grin.

The shared camaraderie was short lived. A few minutes later the pack and I went down to see if we could get any information out of the front desk about the floor's occupants.

The desk clerk told us that the guests on the fourteenth floor had been very quiet. They'd had no phone calls or room service during the time they'd been in the rooms. Actually, it had been almost as if no one had been on that floor at all.

Once we realized we weren't getting anywhere at the front desk, we headed into the parking garage to see what vehicles were left. The sedan was now parked near the other cars, but the van and the Mustang were missing.

When we went back inside, we found Brenda and Rafe in the lobby talking with one of the boys. Brenda was asking for portable police scanners, and I made sure to put in a similar request for the pack. The ghoul assured us that we would get them, but it might not be until the next night.

"Why don't we go back to the Renaissance Center," I suggested. "We can get the rest of our cars and discuss how to divide the city to search for them."

Everyone agreed and soon we were on our way. Once back at the Center, Brenda opened a map on the hood of her rental car.

I looked at Madelynn and Logan. "We should check out areas that you are familiar with and let them take the rest of the city."

"There are how many vampires with them?" Michael asked.

"We don't know," Brenda reminded him. "We can speculate how many there were at one point, but now there's no way to tell how many there are now."

"You've dealt with them before, do you have any idea?" Jason prompted.

He shrugged. "There were seven earlier."

"There's nothing saying they haven't embraced ten more," I drawled.

"Of course not," he agreed quickly, "but don't they have to hang in the ground a while before they can do anything?"

"They don't have to do anything," Brenda shot back, sounding as if she knew from personal experience.

I looked at Michael. "You were the one who hung with them for a while, what do they do?"

"They take people's souls and possess their bodies," he said gravely.

I was getting damn sick and tired of hearing his 'poor me' line, but I held my tongue and turned the topic to dividing up the city. Brenda and Rafe would take James with them, while Michael and Jason would go together. Madelynne and Logan offered to take one of my ghouls, which left Scott and me with the other.

It didn't take very long to divide the city up into four groups, and while the Salem group fell to arguing amongst themselves, the rest of us headed for our cars.

# *The Ties that Bind*

Do you remember me?

How could you forget?

Marc Anthony - Remember Me

"We can take Frasier," Madelynne suggested when we reached her car. "You and Scott take Petor."

I didn't like the sounds of that. I knew I could trust Frasier to watch over me, it was the thought of him with Madelynne and Logan that I didn't like. "Why don't I keep him with me," I replied calmly, hiding the unease I felt at letting Petor out of my sight. "Just take care of Petor."

She nodded and I stepped close to the man in question.

"Be careful," I ordered.

He smiled patiently and nodded. "I will."

"Call me if you get into any trouble," I added.

"He'll be fine," Madelynne interrupted. "Let's get going."

With a final glance at Petor, I followed Scott to the Suburban. A few minutes later we were all buckled in and on our way. I decided that now was a good time to have a talk with Frasier, to sound him out on a few things I had questions on. While we talked, I kept my eyes peeled for anything that might lead us to the Sabbat.

"Are you hungry?" I asked Frasier.

He shrugged. "Not really."

"How are your blood levels doing?" I didn't want to be nosy, but I needed to know if I had to feed him tonight.

"Fine," he replied with a grin.

"At the risk of sounding like a broken record," I murmured wryly, "I don't remember the last time I fed you."

"You don't act much like you want to remember," he murmured.

"Why should I?" I replied coolly. "Seems like all Christina had was people telling her what to do."

"There was some of that," he admitted, "but you always manage to do what you want to."

I shot him a dry look. "Like moving to Salem?"

He shrugged. "You might have been ordered to report there, but you were happy."

"Was I?" I demanded softly, searching his face for clues as to what Christina had been like. "Was Jason what I wanted?" Scott's hands tightened on the wheel, but I ignored his reaction. I had to know these answers and I didn't want to wait until I was alone with Frasier to ask him.

To my surprise, he sighed despondently. "He was."

"You don't sound too happy about that," I said with a frown as I looked away from Scott's grim profile.

"Look, when you hired me you told me how it was with him," Frasier replied smoothly. "I never liked it much, but you're the boss."

At least Christina had been in charge of something about her life. "And how was it with him?"

"He is—was everything to you," he told me, sounding very sincere. "Everyone knew it. When he walked in the room you lit up. You still do, a little, but it's not the same."

Of course it wasn't. "Nothing's the same, but that's not necessarily a bad thing," I murmured. "Did I love him?"

He sighed again. "As much as I'd like to say no, you loved him like nothing else, Tina." He leaned forward and put his hand on my shoulder. "Look, if you don't want him around, that's fine with me, gives me a chance with you. But honestly I think you should reconsider. Some day you might get your memory back and if you push him away now, you'd never forgive yourself."

"If I had it that bad, how come I was bound to someone else?" I demanded skeptically.

He shrugged and sat back, letting his hand fall away. "From what I understand, it wasn't intentional. Luke just happened to be around when you needed blood in a bad way. You never would have been with him if Jason hadn't walked out on you after his embrace."

"He walked out on me?" I asked, ignoring Scott's smirk. "And I took him back?"

"I guess he had some issues being Nosferatu and all," Frasier replied. "But he got over it."

I rubbed my temples to fight against the tension I felt building. "Okay, my head hurts. I thought he was Gangrel."

"He is," he assured me. "When I first met him he was Nosferatu, but something happened when we got here from Ramadan. He says went into the chapel at the holding and God gave him back his dashing good looks. That's when he followed us to Salem."

I'd never heard of anyone switching clans before, but then again there was just so much I didn't remember. "And we got married."

"You did."

I thought about that for a long moment. I couldn't imagine getting married, I mean, what was the point? It wasn't like we could have kids and a dog. Unless Brenda was right and we had been deeply in love. Of course, there was one more explanation, the clan might have forced us to get married to try and counteract my blood bond with Luke. "We were happy?" I asked softly.

"Yeah, you were." He sounded very sure about that, but not necessarily pleased. Of course Scott didn't look very pleased.

"You sound like you weren't happy," I replied. "Why?"

Frasier reached up to touch my hair, but stopped just short of contact. "I told you at the beginning that I'd take anything you can give me," he said seriously. "If Jason were out of the picture, maybe you'd give me more."

I didn't have the heart to tell him that Scott had more of a chance with me than he did. "So you want him out?"

"Only if that's what you want," he assured me. "I want you to be safe and happy."

"Even if it's with someone else?"

A shadowed look passed over his face. "I've lived with that for the last year," he told me.

Oh, I'd had my hands full with this one. How I'd managed not to alienate him or piss Jason off was something I wished I understood. I'd had enough of the subject anyway, and from the looks of his locked jaw, so had Scott. I turned the subject to another one of the Salem crew.

"What about Brenda?"

"Your sister?"

I lifted an eyebrow at him. "Is she?"

"You and her had a good thing going," he told me. "You don't always agree, but you respect each other, love each other." He caught my eye meaningfully. "Same thing goes with her as it does for Jason. If you push her away from you now, you'll regret it later."

"But she shot me," I reminded him roughly.

"It was an accident, really," he insisted. "She was aiming at the bad guy and missed. She's your sister, Christina."

"Tina," I corrected firmly.

He grinned. "Sorry, Tina."

I let it slide and hoped he'd follow my wishes. If he didn't, I'd have to take stronger measures. "What about Rafe?"

"Rafe is your brother-in-law," he reminded me. "You're not real close, but you're friends."

"And Michael?"

"I don't know him that well," he admitted with a shrug. "But I know you liked him well enough to invite him to your wedding even though you knew it would make Brenda and Rafe uncomfortable."

That didn't mean very much to me, I might have just wanted to irritate everyone. "Can I trust him?" I demanded. "Can I trust any of them?"

"Normally, I'd say yes," he replied gravely. "In this situation? Maybe."

At least he was being honest. "Why?"

"They want to make sure you're safe, Tina," he told me. "If they think your new friends are hurting you or keeping you against your will, they will take you back to Salem by any means necessary."

I shook my head wondering what I'd done to make them mistrust my judgment. "The pack isn't doing anything to me I don't want them to, Frasier."

He nodded, seeming quite relieved. "We won't have anything to worry about then."

Not from the Salem crew, anyway, but there were other dangers. The Sabbat for one, Ralph's bunch for another. "Do we have to worry about James or Cormac?"

He paused for a moment as if debating what to say. "I was there the night you found out he was your brother," he said finally. "You didn't like knowing that Dougal had embraced and abandoned you, but you were happy enough to have Cormac in the family. James is Cormac's child. We've worked with him a lot in the last year."

"Cormac or James?"

"Yes," he replied with an easy smile. "I think you didn't approve of the reason behind James' embrace, but you like him well enough."

"What about Cormac?" I asked, remembering his rudeness. "Can I trust him?"

"I think the same rules apply," he admitted. "If Cormac asked him to, James would do whatever it took to get you home, but as long as you're safe, neither of them will interfere."

That didn't reassure me too much, but I felt a little better. If they paid any attention at all, they would see that no one in the pack was hurting me, that they were keeping me safer than I'd apparently been in Salem.

"What do you know about Chaos?" I asked, changing the subject.

He made a disgusted sound low in his throat. "Lord Malcolm. He took over a monastery I was a member of in Ramadan. He tried to hurt Lena. You stopped him."

"Jesus fucking Christ," I muttered. "You guys are going to give me a superiority complex, I swear." I turned to look at my ghoul. "Is he a bad guy?"

"Yeah, he is," he replied seriously. "He did some pretty bad things at the Monastery, things I didn't like or agree with. He was the reason I left there."

"But?" I could tell there was a but.

"But you told me about dreams you had," he admitted. "Good dreams of when he was your friend, your mentor. You couldn't understand how he went bad."

"But he did go bad?"

"Yes." Something about his eyes and the tone of his voice made me believe him. "I'm not sure how he got you out of the house, but I wish I knew what happened to you in Russia. Maybe if we knew how he took your memory, we could get it back."

I turned away and gazed out the windshield. "What if I wanted to forget everything?"

"Why would you want to?" he demanded, his voice full of disbelief.

I couldn't explain it to him, hell I couldn't even explain it to myself. "Can't everyone just give me time?" I murmured to myself. "Get to know me for who I am now?"

Frasier laid an understanding hand on my shoulder. "I'll give you anything you need, Tina," he vowed softly. "Anything."

I looked back at him, aware for the first time that he was in love with me. It was more than the bonding, or at least more intense than the bond I had over Petor. Frasier wanted to be my lover, but he was willing to take anything I would give him. Gratefully I placed my hand over his.

"When I asked you to take me with you," he said softly, "you insisted that your life was more dangerous than mine would ever be. You were right, Tina. I've been with you for the last year, watching your back and taking care of Jason when you weren't around."

"What, he couldn't take care of himself?" I asked with a smile

"He can," he replied firmly. "But you seem to think he needs taking care of. There has been a few times I've pulled his ass out of the fire for you."

I laughed a little and was going to ask for details when my phone rang. It was Brenda.

"I've just had a meeting and I have received a ritual that could help us partially restore your memory," she said tentatively.

Why did every thing have to come back to my memory? Although I knew that if one of the pack had amnesia I'd be obsessed with helping them too. "Oh?"

"Are you interested?"

I'd anticipated the question but I didn't know how to answer it. "What does it involve?"

"On your part, only your presence and a pint of your blood," she told me. "From those who hope to have you remember them, it will require the tip of the pinkie finger of the left hand."

"Gross," I murmured, drawing Scott's attention.

"It could be regenerated," she added.

"What are the risks?"

"The ritual has never been performed in this city," she admitted reluctantly. "We don't know what the risks are."

She sounded like she'd been telling the truth, but that didn't mean there weren't any risks. "You said that it requires the finger from those who wish me to remember. Who is going to participate?"

"Myself and Antonio, so far," she replied. "I haven't had the chance to speak with Jason or Michael, but I'm sure they will also want to participate."

I wasn't so sure about Michael, but I had to agree that Jason would. "When did you want to do this?"

"Tomorrow evening around nine o'clock," she told me. "In our suite at the hotel if that's all right. There are supplies I need to gather, and I'd like some time to study the ritual."

While I didn't relish the idea of walking into their hotel room again, I knew that was probably the best place for it. I wondered if the ritual would hurt me but I knew without a doubt it would hurt those who chose to sacrifice their fingers for my memory.

"Would you be willing to have the ritual done?" Brenda repeated.

I thought about it for a long moment, not really sure if I wanted to remember my past. I already had everything I needed really, a haven, people I could count on, even those I felt I could call family. I didn't need Brenda or any of her friends and I honestly didn't know if I wanted them in my life.

Then I remembered Jason's face, the look in his eyes when he smiled at me. I was drawn inexplicably to something about him, and it would be nice to know what it was. If I didn't know any better, I would have said I loved him. As it was I didn't know him well enough to trust him, let alone call what I felt love.

That was the crux of the whole matter, actually. I didn't know if I could trust any of them as far as I could throw them. If they'd decided to turn on us at the hotel we would have been hard pressed to defend ourselves. I didn't know if I could go on wondering if or when they would decide I needed to come 'home'.

"Yes," I said at last. "Do you mind if I bring a few people with me?"

"I haven't objected yet," she replied dryly. "Do you mind that all of our group will be here?"

"I haven't been able to stop you yet," I shot back. "We'll be there at nine."

"Fine," she replied.

There wasn't much more to the conversation after that. By the time I'd hung up we'd finished checking our portion of the city and not found anything that could have been the Sabbat. Tired and frustrated, we headed back to the pub.

## Gifts

So we sort through the pieces  
My friends and I  
David Crosby - Hero

It was nearly five in the morning when Frasier's phone rang. By that time there were only seven of us left at the pub. Carissa was behind the bar working on the foamy tap again. Scott, Logan and Madelynne were talking quietly at one of the tables near the bar. Petor, Frasier and I were sitting at the bar talking about the boys going shopping while I slept during the day.

When the sound of his phone broke the quiet of the bar, Frasier pulled it out of his pocket and looked at the caller ID. "It's Cormac," he told me with a worried look as he pressed the answer button. After a few words of greeting, he looked at me questioningly. "Can I tell him where we are?"

"Why does he want to know?" I replied warily.

"Why do you want to know?" he asked into the phone. After a moment he turned to me with a confused look on his face. "He has a package for me from you."

I glanced over at Madelynne, but she just shrugged. I didn't much like the idea, but I didn't see where it could hurt. There were seven of us here after all; unless the man came with an army we could handle it. "We have to solve this mystery somehow," I said softly. "Have him bring it."

Frasier gave him the address, then hung up with no further courtesies. "He'll be here in a moment," he said as he put the phone away. "I'm sure he'll have Eliza with him, he always does."

Less than a minute later the door opened and as I turned to look I put my hand under my jacket on the hilt of my gun. Amazingly enough Cormac was walking through the door with Eliza and another man not far behind him. I eased my hand out from under my jacket, silently telling myself not to start anything unless he did first.

"It's okay," Frasier assured me. "It's just Cormac."

They began walking toward the bar, but stopped when I stood up. Cormac seemed surprised, or maybe relieved to see me, but thankfully he didn't say a word. He was holding a large manila envelope in his left hand.

As the three of us walked toward them, I studied the group. In the front was the man that everyone said was my brother. He was tall, with dark hair and hard eyes that told me he was a dangerous man to cross. He wore a suit and I could tell he was fully armed beneath it. He watched our approach calmly, and seemed to approve of the fact that Frasier was at my side.

If Cormac looked calm enough, Eliza was nearly bristling with tension. She was quite pretty in an aggressive sort of way. She didn't have a weapon in her hand, but it looked like she was ready to pull one at any moment. Watching her walk across the room was like watching a caged mountain lion, the way she kept looking around her. While she kept her hands away from her weapons, every once in a while I could see a tell tale movement toward something she kept in the small of her back. I was betting on a gun, but then again a stake might have served her better in this company.

The third person in the party was a tall man I didn't remember seeing from the pictures I'd seen. His hair was a light brown and his eyes were a piercing green that seemed to see everywhere at once. He wasn't Kindred, but I was betting he wasn't simply human. Hell, he didn't even look armed, but that didn't mean he wasn't dangerous.

Without a word Cormac pulled a FedEx envelope from the manila one in his hand, then a smaller letter sized envelope from the FedEx one. As he handed the smaller envelope to Frasier, I could see his name written on it in what was either my handwriting or a damn good imitation.

"It's your handwriting," Frasier told me, opening the envelope. "Where did you get this?" he asked Cormac.

"It came to the Bathori Mansion this evening by courier," the man replied. His voice was much the same as it had been on the phone, all business.

Frasier skimmed the writing quickly, then looked up in surprise. "When was this sent?"

He looked at the date on the FedEx envelope. "It is dated the morning of two days ago."

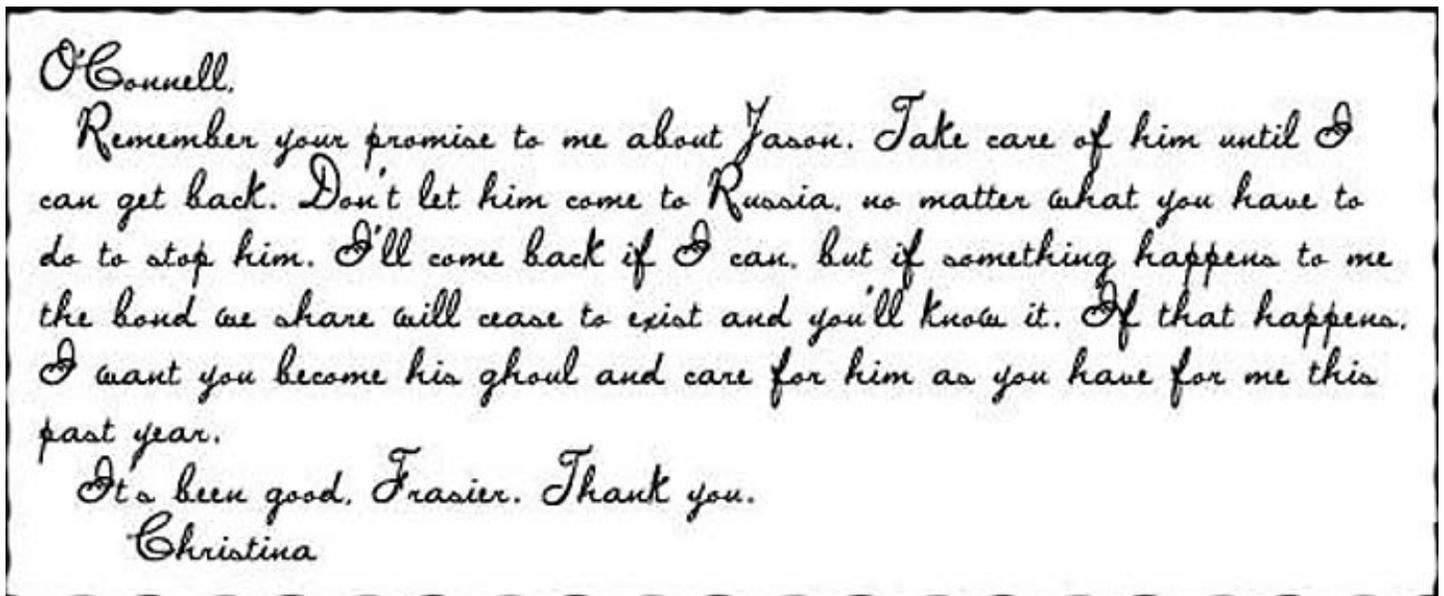
"At which point we knew that she was here," Frasier replied, looking down at me with confusion on his face.

Cormac handed over the FedEx envelope and together Frasier, Petor and I studied it.

"That looks like my handwriting," Petor murmured.

"It is," Cormac replied firmly.

While I didn't understand his surety, I knew there had to be a reason for it. Maybe he saw visions like Brenda did when he held things. Frasier handed me the envelopes and the letter. Other than recognizing the handwriting, the package told me nothing. I gave the FedEx envelope back to Cormac and opened the letter.



O'Connell,  
Remember your promise to me about Jason. Take care of him until I can get back. Don't let him come to Russia, no matter what you have to do to stop him. I'll come back if I can, but if something happens to me the bond we share will cease to exist and you'll know it. If that happens, I want you become his ghoul and care for him as you have for me this past year.  
It's been good, Frasier. Thank you.  
Christina

From the sound of things, Christina must have had a real hard on for Jason. "Lucky for you I showed back up," I told Frasier as I folded the letter. "Is that the only letter that was in the envelope?" I asked Cormac.

"No," he admitted. "There was one to myself, Brenda and Jason."

I raised an eyebrow. "What did they say?"

"I don't know, I have read only mine," he told me.

Trying to get information from him was like pulling teeth. "What did it say?"

"Nothing we haven't already gleaned."

It was obvious that he wasn't going to elaborate. I studied his face for a long time wondering what Christina had written to him. "You're Cormac," I said softly.

He smiled slightly. "Yes."

I looked to the girl at his side. "And that's Eliza."

"Yes," he replied, glancing down at her.

"And who's that?" I asked, gesturing toward the human.

"A friend of mine," he said simply.

Not only was he rude, he was definitely not a font of information. He irritated me more than Michael, if it were possible. I stared at him, wondering just how much Christina had trusted him.

"We must be going," he said after a long moment. "We will see you tomorrow night."

"Oh, you're joining the party?" I asked, a little surprised.

"Wouldn't miss it."

A split second later Carissa started screaming. We turned to see why, but she was staring toward the door. When I looked back at Cormac, I saw that a portal had opened into a park somewhere. It was dark there, of course, but I could see a motorcycle and a park bench nearby. The three of them walked through the portal and it closed behind them. Immediately Carissa stopped screaming.

"Okay," I murmured dryly, "he's rude, withholds information, and has cool toys."

Shaking my head, I motioned that the boys should go back to the bar while I went over to talk to the others. "I meant to talk to you about a call I got from Brenda earlier," I said hesitantly as I sat down with them. "They have apparently found this ritual that may partially restore my memory. They don't know what the risks to it are because apparently it hasn't been performed in the city in living memory," I added grimly.

"Do you want to remember anything?" she asked, studying my face.

"No," I admitted, "but I think it would be a good idea if I could remember whether or not we could trust them. If we can't, then we kill them and don't worry about it, but either way we need to know." I couldn't really imagine killing Jason, but if he was my enemy I'd have no choice. "I arranged to meet them at their hotel at nine tomorrow and I was kind of hoping that you would go with me," I said, glancing between the three of them.

"I mean is this something you want to do?" she clarified. "Do you really want to remember them?"

"We need to know if we can trust these people," I told her seriously, "and this is the only way."

She nodded reluctantly. "What do you have to do?"

"Give some blood and be there," I answered with a shrug. "But they have to chop their finger off, which might be worth seeing."

"You have no idea what the risks are?"

"Nobody knows, it hasn't been done in the city." I glanced at the others, but I couldn't read their faces. "I haven't actually seen the ritual, but if all I have to do is give blood, I can't see where there would be that many risks."

"Who will be there?" Madelynne asked.

"Well, apparently Cormac and his puppy," I murmured, glancing toward the door. "I assume the rest of the Salem crew also. Brenda didn't say anything about Cormac being there, but he said he'd see me tomorrow so I'm assuming."

"And you only have to give your blood? How much?" She seemed concerned, for which I was grateful.

"I wouldn't think very much, a pint or so."

"For every person who cuts off their finger, or total?"

"I wouldn't agree to giving that much, I think it's total." Brenda hadn't said exactly, but I wasn't planning on handing over that much blood to any Tremere. "I think that if I have a few people who can watch over me, more than just the boys over there, I'll feel much better about doing it."

"We'll go," she assured me, "but I'm not real sure you should do this."

"I'm not positive about it either," I admitted, "but I think it's important that I remember whether or not we can trust these people. I mean, even going to the hotel with them tonight was dangerous."

"You're right." She looked at Logan for a long moment, then turned back to me. "Are you sure that this ritual isn't something that could make you more susceptible to them?"

The thought had occurred to me. "I haven't seen the ritual but I plan on looking it over before she does it. Of course I don't know if I'm going to be able to tell anything. Unless you know of a Tremere who could just pop in and say 'hey, this is not going to hurt you' I don't really have any choice but to put a little bit of faith into it. Do you think it's too dangerous?"

"Did she seem sincere when she told you about it?" she asked. "Did you feel that it was right?"

"I don't think she was lying," I said thoughtfully. "You can judge for yourself when we get there tomorrow. If we don't like the situation I can always refuse at that point."

She nodded. "We can always leave. You didn't agree to it a hundred percent anyway, did you?"

"I told her I'd be there."

"Right, but you didn't say specifically that you'd give your blood, did you?" she demanded.

"She asked me if I was willing to do it and I said yes," I admitted slowly. "But if I get there and I don't like the situation or the ritual, there's nothing stopping me from walking away. It's not like I'm blood bound to the Tremere or anything," I added with a slight smile. I glanced toward the door where the portal had been a few minutes earlier. "What did you think of Mr. Brennan?"

She sat back and looked at me. "He didn't really seem that rude. He was short and to the point, but he didn't seem rude. You asked him a question and he answered it, he just didn't elaborate on anything."

"He's annoying," I muttered.

"Well this is the only encounter I've had with him," she said reasonably, "and I suppose I can't base how I feel about him off that."

She had a point, maybe I had been a little too sensitive. "I guess I could keep a little more of an open mind about the people from Salem, but it's hard." Part of the problem was that I still didn't want to believe that they were my friends.

"Wait until tomorrow, I'll let you know what I think then," she said, looking down at the letter on the table. "That's your handwriting. Is anything in the letter familiar? Do you remember any of it?"

I simply raised an eyebrow and didn't bother to answer her.

"By the look on your face that's a no," she added with a smile. She scanned the writing quickly. "You wrote it two days ago."

"Yeah, and look here, I told Frasier that if anything happened to me that he was supposed to be ghouled to Jason," I pointed out irritably. "Now why would I tell him that?"

She shrugged. "The bond hasn't been broken, it's a moot point."

I nodded. "Apparently them going to Russia was a big no. And I called him O'Connell, which is his last name, but why wouldn't I call him Frasier?"

"I don't know, he's not my ghoul," she replied dryly. "Maybe you liked O'Connell better than Frasier. Maybe you should ask him. Oh look, he's right over there."

"I will," I promised. It was getting late and I was hungry so it was time to take the boys upstairs. I put my hand on Scott's shoulder as I stood, and he gave me a warm look before I turned away to get the boys.

They both were pretty tired and didn't argue about going upstairs. I followed them to the door of their room and leaned against the doorframe while they sat down on Petor's bed.

"Brenda has found a ritual she thinks may partially restore my memory," I announced.

"When is she going to do it?" Frasier asked, smiling in relief. Petor didn't seem to care.

"Tomorrow," I replied. "We're supposed to be there at nine." I explained that I'd have to give blood and that everyone who wanted me to remember them had to donate part of a finger. "I thought I'd give both of you the opportunity to participate, if you wanted."

"I will," Frasier replied instantly.

Petor just shrugged. "Do I have to?" he asked.

"No," I assured him, a little relieved that he wasn't interested. "I know I can trust you without it. Both of you," I added, looking at Frasier.

"I know," he replied softly, "but I want you to remember me."

I nodded, having anticipated his answer. "It's been a long night," I said softly. "I'm hungry."

Petor simply nodded, but Frasier grinned. I felt a little uncomfortable, but I knew that sooner or later the three of us would have to be together when I fed so I figured it would be best to get it over with now. I sat down between them on the edge of the bed.

I'd fed once from Petor since waking in Detroit, so I turned to him first. He leaned toward me and turned his head to offer me his neck. I could hear his heartbeat speed up in anticipation as I moved closer. Slowly I sank my teeth into the tender flesh of his neck and let the hot liquid fill my mouth.

The taste was incredible, warm and coppery, and it filled my senses. The sound of his heartbeat echoed through me until my heart matched its rhythm. I drank slowly, savoring the taste and texture of his blood that already seemed familiar to me.

Other than placing a hand on my shoulder to steady us, Petor didn't move while I drank. He drifted in his own world of contentment until I withdrew my teeth and licked the wound closed. He looked both satisfied and disappointed when I pulled away, almost as if he'd wanted me to continue. Sighing, he laid back on the bed and closed his eyes.

"My turn," Frasier whispered hoarsely.

I turned to find him very close to me, so close that I could feel his warm breath on my face. The look in his eye was so sensual I was caught for a moment in his gaze. Slowly he brushed my hair away from my cheek and followed the curve of my neck with his fingertips.

"How long has it been?" I asked softly.

"Couple of weeks," he told me, sounding breathless with anticipation. "Take all you need."

"Did I feed from you often?" I couldn't imagine Jason allowing it if Frasier behaved this way every time.

"Not often enough," he drawled, the sound of his voice sharpening my hunger. "And not usually from the neck."

His heart was pounding and I could see that his pupils were dilated far more than they should have been for the amount of light in the room. I didn't need to remember what sex was like to know that he was very aroused.

He leaned closer until our lips were almost touching then hesitated for a long moment, waiting. Looking deep into his eyes I knew that it would be so easy to kiss him, to bring our lip together and bite into his tongue for the sustenance I wanted so badly. The taste of Petor's blood in my mouth was like an appetizer for the liquid I could almost hear moving beneath Frasier's skin.

Resisting the temptation to touch my mouth to his, I turned my head and eased forward until my lips were against the pulse his neck. The skin jumped beneath the soft touch as his heart pounded even faster. His arms came around me and he turned his head just enough to give me better access.

Lightly I touched his skin with my tongue and the salty tang only whetted my appetite. Slowly, carefully, I sank my teeth into his flesh and he pulled me closer as his blood spilled onto my tongue. Instantly my heart leapt to match the rhythm of his.

Blood is only blood of course, and within each species so much of it tastes the same, but there were subtle differences between Frasier's blood and Petor's. The biggest difference of course was the amount of hormones present in what I was now drinking. It wasn't that Petor hadn't wanted my 'kiss', he just hadn't been anywhere near as happy about it as Frasier was right now.

Once again I drank slowly, savoring the heady cocktail of my ghoul's life force. His hands tightened on my back, pulling me into his lap. I pressed even closer, for the moment letting the hormones course through my body and override my better judgment.

He gasped when I pulled my teeth free, and gave a harsh moan when I dragged my tongue across the twin wounds to close them. His breathing was ragged and I could feel the effort it took for him to bring it under control. I kept my face tucked into his neck for a long moment, enjoying the warmth of his body against mine. His heat enveloped me even as it ran through me, warming me to the core.

"T-Tina," he whispered brokenly.

I moved back far enough to see his face and I wasn't surprised at the passion written there. Slowly I eased away from him until I was standing between his knees. He took my hand and brought it to his lips to press a kiss on the palm.

The laugh that spilled from my lips was low and sultry, even to my ears. The sound made Petor look up in surprise. Gently I pulled my hand away and stepped back from the bed.

"Be good," I gently chastised Frasier. "I'm married, remember?"

He grinned, unrepentant. "I thought you'd forgotten."

I laughed again, a more normal laugh this time. "I may remember tomorrow," I reminded him reluctantly. "I doubt Jason would approve. Besides, we're making Petor blush."

Frasier had apparently forgotten my other ghoul, and now he glanced at the man guiltily. Petor turned away quickly to hide the stain on his face.

"Dawn's coming," I said softly, turning to face the east. Somewhere in the distance the sky was pink with the promise of a new day. Humans elsewhere in the city would be waking, but I could feel the sun like a weight pressing down on me, pulling at my consciousness.

"Need help getting to bed?" Frasier offered, coming to his feet.

I smiled up at him. "I think I can handle it myself. Be careful today when you go out," I ordered them both. "Take care of each other and be back by sundown."

"We know the drill," Petor said with an understanding smile. "One lamp and be quiet until you're awake."

Frasier looked at me in surprise. "You let him in your room when you're sleeping?"

I didn't understand his shock. "How else could he be there when I wake up?" I asked reasonably. While I could tell he wanted to say something else, dawn was too close at hand. "Be careful," I repeated as I left, hurrying to my room and to bed before the rising sun left me helpless.

# Separation Anxiety

This force is running you around now  
Getting you down now  
Poe - Angry Johnny

When I woke the next night the room was silent and dark. The first thought that leaped into my head was that something had happened to Petor, but then I remembered that Frasier was supposed to be here too. I told myself that they had lost track of time and were in the other bedroom and made a note to talk to them about being with me at sundown.

I quickly went back to my first thought when I found the second bedroom empty. Rather than searching the building for them, I dialed Petor's cell phone. It was a long time before anyone answered, and when they did it wasn't Petor.

"Who is this?" I demanded.

"Who is this?" a man's voice repeated.

I barely stopped myself from growling. "I asked first."

"You're calling me."

"I'm not calling you," I shot back. "I'm calling the person who owns this phone."

"He's a little, ah, tied up at the moment," the man drawled.

I didn't like the thought of Petor in bonds and most likely in pain, but if the Sabbath had him, that's exactly where he was. "Where is he?"

"He's not going anywhere." His voice was relaxed, even amused.

I tried to get him to tell me where Petor was, but the man wouldn't cooperate. "Great, another rude asshole." I murmured before demanding, "Where are you?"

"At my home."

"Don't be coy," I shot back. "Tell me where you are."

"Moi?"

"Listen, you bastard," I growled, "tell me where he is."

"Which one?"

I closed my eyes and fought to keep my control. "You've got both of them don't you?" I demanded, even as in the back of my mind I felt that niggling sensation I always felt when Frasier was nearby. Concentrating on it a moment, I realized that it was coming from the boys' bedroom.

"All three of them," he corrected.

Focusing on the sensation, I threw the open the door to the boys' room, but of course neither of them were there. Suddenly it occurred to me that the strange feeling was coming from the dresser, from the necklace lying on top of the dresser to be exact.

"What is it you want?" I demanded into the phone. I crossed the room and carefully picked up the chain. It was fairly long and silver, with a stone pendant. The stone was inscribed with runes I didn't recognize, but this close it was clear to me that I had some kind of connection with the stone.

"Me?" he said softly. "I don't want anything."

"You must want something or you wouldn't have taken them," I said reasonably. All three of them, he'd said. I wondered who the third person was. "What will it take to get them back?"

"My master told me to... fetch them," he drawled.

"What will it take for your master to give them back?" I demanded impatiently.

"I don't know, you'd have to talk to him."

"Then put him on," I ordered in a harsh voice.

"He's otherwise engaged."

I lost patience in that moment and knew if I didn't get off the phone I would start begging for my ghouls return. "Then tell him to call me when he's free," I told him.

"Certainly."

Without another word I hung up the phone and turned toward the stairs. "Madelynne!" I screamed as I stumbled down the steps and nearly fell into the family room. "Scott! Logan!"

Madelynne appeared a moment later in the bathroom doorway, dressed haphazardly in a robe. "What's going on?"

"They're gone," I exclaimed, fighting the panic that was sweeping through me.

Scott appeared at that moment with a towel wrapped around his waist. He crossed the room in a few quick strides and he took my arm to steady me.

"Who's gone?" Madelynne demanded.

"Petor, and Frasier," I told her, fighting tears. "They're gone, they have them."

"Who has them?" Madelynne urged.

"The Sabbat."

"How do you know?" she demanded.

"I called Petor's phone," I explained. "They answered."

"They said 'hi, we're the Sabbat?'" she asked doubtfully.

"In so many words," I replied. "Do you want to call? They have them."

"Do you know where they're at?"

"Well you know that funny little thing I felt coming from Frasier?" I asked, holding up the necklace. "Here it is."

"Maybe Howard can trace their phones," she said thoughtfully, turning to look at her lover who was standing near the stairs. "We'll get him on it. Logan?"

"Do you think they're okay?" I asked urgently.

"I don't know," she replied softly.

At her nod, Scott led me over to the couch and sat me down, but his kindness proved too much for me. Knowing that someone stronger than me was in charge gave me the freedom to fall apart. I put my head against his shoulder and burst into tears. How could I have done this? How could I have let this happen? Petor and Frasier were my responsibility and I'd let them be taken as if they meant nothing to me.

"Logan, call Howard and get him looking for them," I heard Madelynne say. "Scott, go get dressed."

He didn't seem to be listening since he didn't get up. I could feel his hand on my back making soothing motions.

"Get dressed," she repeated firmly.

Reluctantly he got up and a moment later Madelynne sat down next to me and touched my hand.

"It's okay," she soothed. "We'll find them."

"H-he said they have all three of th-them," I managed to say through my tears. "He wouldn't tell me where th-they are and the b-bastard's supposed to call me back."

"What do you mean they have all three of them?" she asked.

"I don't know."

At that moment Scott rejoined us wearing only his pants, and they weren't even buttoned properly. His shirt shoes and socks were clutched in his hand and he wore a towel on his head. Madelynne gave him a stern look as she stood up and he took her place beside me.

I knew I couldn't fall apart like this, it wouldn't help the situation or get my ghouls back. I had to get myself under control and find out how to save them. Then I remembered what the man had said about them having all three of them and panic swept through me once more.

"Maybe they have Jason," I murmured, looking down at the cell phone in my hand. I steeled myself for another chat with the Sabbath and dialed Jason's number. To my relief, he answered it himself.

"Are you alright?" I demanded, fighting to stay calm.

"Yeah, for right now," he replied, sounding confused or preoccupied, I couldn't decide which. "Rafe's gone."

"So are the boys," I admitted, feeling panic creep back into my voice. "The bastards have them."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Any idea where—"

"Brenda's working on it," he assured me. "She's in her room right now."

"She can find them?" I demanded urgently. "She can do some kind of spooky boo thing?"

He laughed softly. "Okay, you have been talking to me too much. Yeah, she's trying to figure out something right now, we're prime and ready to go. You might want to do the same. You might want to head over here because as soon as she comes up with something we're heading out."

"All right," I agreed without hesitation. If the pack wouldn't go with me, I'd go alone.

"Hurry," he urged.

As I hung up the phone, Madelynne came back down fully dressed. She came over and helped me to my feet. "You need to get dressed," she said kindly. "You can't go out like that."

I looked down and realized for the first time that I still wore my nightgown. It was a bit revealing, too revealing for me to have been sitting on the couch falling apart in Scott's arms.

"Rafe is missing too," I told her as she led me upstairs. "Brenda can do some kind of spooky boo to find him. I told him we'd go over there. Do we want to call the rest of the pack in?"

"Logan's taking care of it," she assured me.

Although I was feeling a bit more in control of myself, Madelynne helped me dress in the leather pants and tight tank top I felt most comfortable in. I pulled on the leather jacket and boots to complete the outfit, then grabbed the necklaces from the dresser and draped them haphazardly around my neck. It only took a moment longer to grab every weapon and piece of ammunition in the room.

We went to the boys' room next, hoping to find some clue as to what had happened, but there was no sign. Frasier's bag was gone, as were the keys to the Suburban. A glance out the window showed that the vehicle was gone as well.

"Is everyone coming?" I asked Logan when we made it back downstairs.

"I didn't speak to all of them, but I think so," he assured me.

Madelynne led me back over to the couch and sat me down again. With a start I realized that I was shaking, and I pressed my hands together to stop the nervous movement. A part of me wanted to get up and start punching walls, but I managed to restrain myself.

"Did you want to wait for everyone to get here or did you want to go?" Logan asked Madelynne.

"We should wait," she replied firmly.

As much as I didn't like waiting, I knew it was the best idea.

Suddenly the sound of glass breaking drifted up from the bar. Scott was the first to the stairs followed by Logan and Madelynne, but I wasn't far behind. At least the promise of violence had made my hands stop shaking.

When we reached the main floor we saw that Carissa was behind the bar throwing glasses at Mary and Joe, the Gangrel who had driven the truck that had followed us my first night in Detroit.

"I don't have the patience for this tonight," I growled to Madelynne. "Can we kill them?"

"No," she said firmly, walking forward. "What is going on?"

"We just stopped by for a drink," Joe said, dodging a glass that had been aimed at his head.

"Drink elsewhere," I suggested coldly from Madelynne's side.

He grinned at me, ducking another missile. "No, I think we'll stay here. I like the atmosphere."

I looked at Madelynne again. "Can we kill them?"

"No," she repeated.

"Can we at least throw them out bodily?" I asked, frustrated.

"Just a minute," she insisted.

Lucas was trying to restrain Carissa, but since he was on the wrong side of the bar, he couldn't quite reach her. She continued to throw glasses at the intruders as Scott stepped forward, fangs and claws quite evident. I walked with him, hoping for violence to break the tension.

By this time Madelynne was behind the bar with a hand on Carissa's arm. Between her and Logan they managed to drag her away from the glasses, but it didn't do much good. The glasses started shooting up and flinging toward Mary and Joe all by themselves.

"We need to get them out of here before Carissa breaks every glass in the building," I growled to Scott. "We don't have time for this."

Together we took a step closer, and it was obvious our visitors didn't like our aggressive movements. Somehow Madelynne and Logan managed to pull Carissa from the room, and the glasses stopped flying around.

"We don't have time for this tonight," I said, trying a diplomatic approach. "Can we do it some other night? Make a date?"

"No," Joe answered, flashing fangs. "Now's good."

Seeing the claws on his hands, I extended them on my left hand and pulled the Glock from the small of my back with my right. "Look, we can dance tonight if you want to," I warned him gravely, "but you're gonna lose."

Neither of them seemed much impressed. Irritation didn't begin to cover what I felt. Impatiently I shot Joe in the leg. Unfortunately, the bullet didn't explode into flames, or even seem to hurt him at all. I readied myself for quick movement as Joe and Scott launched at each other.

I fired at the girl, aiming for and hitting her in the chest twice. Fire flared and then died from the phosphorous rounds, then she was on me. Her claws raked across my stomach, but before I could reciprocate the damage, Madelynne and Logan were there. Madelynne distracted the girl long enough for Logan to grab a hold of the back of her neck and send her flying toward the entrance. She hit the door and fell through it into the parking lot.

"Fucking bitch," I growled as I fired again, twice. My first shot hit the door and exploded, but the second caught her square in the chest. To my satisfaction, she started screaming in pain.

Scott had fared better than I had in his battle, and Joe stumbled after his woman. I raised my gun to fire after them, but Logan told me to hold my fire. I did so, and the sound of their tires as they pulled away echoed through the night.

"I told them they were going to lose," I muttered darkly to myself as I put the gun away. I ran my hand across my stomach, feeling the damage Mary had done. While there was some blood, it really wasn't bleeding. As long as I didn't try any fancy moves, I'd be all right until I could lay up long enough to heal, which sure as hell wasn't happening until I got my boys back.

I turned to Madelynne. "Is Ralph working with the Sabbat? It's coincidental that they would show up on the same night."

"No, I don't think so," she replied, moving my jacket aside to check my wounds.

I wasn't so sure myself, but I let it go and turned to see to Scott's wound. It wasn't a bad one, more a scratch than anything else. He seemed a lot more concerned about the furrows in my stomach than in his own pain, but I brushed his worry aside. We had more important things to deal with than my injuries.

The rest of the pack came rolling in, thankfully too late to deal with Ralph's cronies. Madelynne set Howard to try and find the location of Petor or Frasier's cell phone, and I added that he should look for Rafe's as well since we had the number. Lucas and Carissa had instructions to close the bar down and repair the damage to the front door. Alex decided to come with us, but the rest of the pack stayed at the Pub to protect it.

Madelynne and Logan drove her car, while the rest of us took Logan's truck. Once we were on our way I called Jason to let him know we'd been delayed. He told me they'd be waiting downstairs and repeated that we should hurry.

## *Driven to Extremes*

Yes I'll die for you  
Pain in my heart it is real  
Candlebox - You

The Salem group was waiting in their car when we pulled up in front of the hotel. I was so relieved to see Jason sitting in the back seat that I wanted to cry. It was one thing to hear his voice on the phone and quite another to actually see that he was all right.

Brenda seemed pale and drawn, if that were possible, with worry making her eyes darker. Michael could hardly sit still, but James seemed calm enough. As we pulled alongside of them, Alex rolled his window down and I leaned past him to look down into their car.

"Follow us," Brenda called, leaning forward to talk to me through James' open window. "I'm able to track Rafe."

"Do you have any idea where they are?" I asked as patiently as I could manage.

She pointed toward the southwest. "That way." She sat back in her seat and James put the car in gear. We formed a small convoy with the Salem car in the lead.

Brenda opened the communications channel into my mind and told me which way they were going before they made the actual turns. I passed the directions on to Scott even though they weren't needed as the Salem car was clearly in sight.

"We're being followed," Scott said when we pulled onto westbound I-96.

I turned to look behind and recognized the truck immediately. They made no effort to hide the fact that they were following us; as a matter of fact they were close enough for me to recognize the occupants. Quickly I took out my phone and called Madelynne. "We're being followed," I said once she picked up.

"By who?" she asked tensely.

"I think its Ralph, Brit and Brett," I told her. "They're following us."

"Call them in the car ahead of us and call me right back," she ordered.

I smiled grimly. "Hold on, I don't have to call them. What do you want me to tell them?"

"That we're being followed," she said impatiently.

*Brenda? I conveyed mentally. We're being followed by Ralph, Brit and Brett. I could tell that she was thinking furiously, but not what she was thinking about. Brenda?*

*I believe that Ralph has extended an offer to help with the Sabbath situation, she replied at last.*

With a little effort I blanked the surface of my mind. The fact that Ralph had spoken with the Salem group was not a good thing. *Was that before or after they attacked the pub?*

*I have no knowledge of what they did prior to or after offering help, she told me.*

*Did he volunteer?* I demanded.

*Yeah, he came to us, she admitted. Is it a bad thing? Normally when someone offers to help one tends to take the hand that is offered.* The sarcasm in her tone was nearly thick enough to taste through our connection.

*Unless they are your mortal enemy, I shot back, in which case you run the risk of dying in the middle of a gunfight.* I turned my attention to the phone still on my ear. "Apparently Ralph and his cronies offered to help with the Sabbat," I told Madelynne. "They were at the hotel earlier this evening."

"Really." I could tell she didn't like it any more than I had. "How close are we to the ghouls?"

*How close are we to the ghouls, Brenda?*

*They are somewhere in the metro area, but I'm not sure yet how close,* she told me. I could feel enough of her mind through the connection to know she was being honest about that at least *I'll know distance better when we get closer.*

"She's not sure how far," I informed Madelynne.

"My first instinct is to turn around," she said softly. "You know he doesn't volunteer help."

I closed my eyes for a moment to try and stop the helpless tears that pricked my eyes from falling. "I cannot leave the boys," I said firmly, struggling to keep my voice steady. "I understand if you want to turn around, but I can't. I can't leave them. I'll go with the Salem group if I have to. I can't leave them."

"Right, but you must realize he will kill you too," she insisted.

"I can't-I can't leave them to die," I told her brokenly. "I can't leave them."

"I'll call you back," she said at last.

When she broke the connection I stared down at Frasier's necklace still clutched in my hand. As much as I understood Madelynne's concerns, there was no way I could turn back now. I would crawl on my belly to follow Brenda at this point if she would lead me to my boys.

*If your friends do not wish to continue in aiding us, then your presence is not required,* Brenda offered through our mental link, making me wonder how much of my conversation with Madelynne she had overheard.

*My presence is required,* I insisted firmly. *The boys are mine and I will take care of them. My friends are simply concerned for their lives because it is well known that Ralph is willing to kill them at a moment's notice, which brings me to wonder why he would help you.* There was only one reason I could think of; they had arranged for Ralph to help them deal with Sabbat and in turn he would help them deal with the pack. *Oh wait,* I told her, anger burning through my words, *I think I know.*

*I don't know,* she maintained calmly. *He offered to help.*

*Ri-ight.* I'd had enough of her presence in my mind. If they were conspiring with Ralph, there was no way I could trust any of them. *We're not likely to get lost any time soon here. If you do happen to lose us, let me know where to go.* When she didn't reply, I closed connection and cursed long and colorfully in several different languages.

I should have suspected that the Salem crew would pull something like this bullshit. They were so damned convinced that the pack was hurting me in some way that they refused to open their eyes and see that I was happy right where I was. I wondered if Christina had ever gotten fed up with their constant meddling and thought perhaps that was one of the reasons she'd taken off alone the night she'd disappeared.

Ralph was the primogen and as such he enjoyed a status in the city that few Kindred ever reached. Still, the prince didn't seem to like him much and I couldn't help but wonder what kind of

trouble we would get into if we made sure Ralph didn't make it through the night. I hoped we wouldn't have to take out any of the Salem crew to do it, but if we had to then so be it.

We turned south on I-275 following the others, and every mile that passed only served to increase my anxiety. God only knew what was happening to Petor and Frasier. The Sabbath was probably using every second it took for us to find them to torture them. I didn't let myself think that they might have been dead already.

I clutched Frasier's necklace and struggled to come up with a good plan in my mind, one that wouldn't get any of us killed. I prayed that my boys weren't dead, that Roger's people hadn't hurt them beyond healing. I wasn't stupid enough to hope that they would be unhurt, the Sabbath had no scruples against torture or maiming.

Soon we were headed east on I-94 and to my relief the Salem car took the first exit we came to. While we pulled onto the city streets I put Frasier's necklace around my neck, wondering as I did so if I'd ever be able to give it back to him.

We drove down several residential streets, hoping that Brenda had the location right in her mind, hoping that the Sabbath hadn't killed the boys before we could get to them. Suddenly I heard Brenda's voice in my head. *It's that house*, she told me, sending me a picture of the one she was talking about.

*Let me know when you come up with a plan*, I shot back before closing the connection. I redialed Madelynn's number and described the house as we drove past it. It was a small two-story house on the left-hand side of the road, and the Suburban and another rental car were parked in the driveway. Not many lights were on, and thankfully the porch light was dark. The nearest streetlight was several houses away.

"It's that house we just passed," I said hurriedly when she answered. Tension roared through me and it took quite an effort not to jump out of the still moving truck right there. "How 'bout we knock on the door and blow away whoever answers it?"

"No," she replied instantly. "Bad idea. Let me talk to Scott."

"Yeah," he said when I passed him the phone. After listening to her for a moment, he added, "She's in the middle. She'd have to go through Alex or me."

"Or the window," I muttered darkly, seriously contemplating it.

"No," he said firmly, cocking his shoulder to hold the phone and putting a strong hand on my arm. On my right I could feel Alex tensing as well.

"She's stressed," Scott told Madelynn, "but she's good."

I didn't feel good. The hand on my arm only made me want to throw it off and kick my way out of the vehicle. Somehow I managed to rein in my impatience and remain where I was while we followed the lead car into the parking lot of a small doctor's office.

Scott parked next to Madelynn, who had kept some distance between her car and the Salem crew. Ralph parked on the other side of them, far enough away that I couldn't see clearly into the cab of his truck.

Everyone climbed out of the Salem car and headed for the trunk that James had popped. They started pulling out large weapons and efficiently arming themselves. I found myself thinking that at least they'd come prepared for war.

"We're here," I said when nobody in the truck moved. "You can let go now."

"Not till I see what they're doing," Scott replied tersely, watching the car next to us.

Madelynne rolled down her window and Alex did the same. I leaned forward so I could see her and asked if I could get out of the truck.

"Scott and Alex are holding you down," she reminded me. "You need to deal with them."

Frowning, I sat back and tried to figure out how to get out of the car without hurting either of the men next to me. Unfortunately, they were both bigger and stronger than I was, and I didn't know if I could do it without expending blood that I might need later.

"You're the one who wanted to just knock on the door and go shooting," she added brusquely.

"Can we?" I begged, sitting forward again. "Please?"

"No, because I'm pretty sure that they're not going to go do that," she told me, gesturing toward Scott and Alex.

"Let's come up with a different plan then," I demanded impatiently, begrudging every second that kept me from coming to the boys' rescue, "but lets get out and go. I mean—"

Scott interrupted my tirade by putting his arm around my shoulders and pulling me close to his side. Strangely enough that action actually helped me to get control of myself. I leaned into him, letting his quiet strength calm me. I still needed desperately to save my ghouls, but logically I knew I wouldn't help them by getting myself killed.

"How is she doing?" Madelynne asked softly.

I leaned forward again. "I'm sitting right here, I'm fine," I said tersely. There was no reason for her to talk like I wasn't there.

She looked past me at Scott and nodded. "Okay, I'm just checking." She turned and said something to Logan, but he didn't seem to like whatever it was. When she brought her attention back to us, she described the house as she'd seen it. Unfortunately, we'd all pretty much seen the same thing so we had nothing else to go on for strategic planning.

"You know, the longer we sit here, the more I'm going to think about Petor and Frasier being in pain," I told her, eyeing the Salem group who seemed to be waiting for something, "and the more upset I'm going to get."

She ignored me and looked at Alex. "Did you guys throw anything in the back of the truck or do you have everything up front with you?"

"It's all up here," he told her.

"Maybe we could take the truck through the front door," I suggested, suddenly liking the idea.

"I'm pretty sure Logan wouldn't want his truck going through someone's front door," Madelynne replied firmly, closing the subject.

A cat's howl split the night just as a large black sedan joined us. It parked near the Salem crew, and a moment later Zach and Archie stepped out to join them. I concentrated for a moment, straining to hear their conversation and not surprisingly, I could.

"What's going on," Zach asked in his rich Spanish accent.

"Jason just sent a cat in to check out the situation," she told him. "It was a stray and it shouldn't be too obvious. There are four Kindred inside and more ghouls than that. Rafe is in the basement I'm sure with the other ghouls."

"Do we have a plan yet?"

"I think probably the best thing to do is split up and enter the house separately." She glanced at each of the others and asked for suggestions, but no one had any.

When Jason pulled out his phone, I passed the information I'd heard along to the pack.

"More than four ghouls," Madelynne repeated. "Is that including yours?"

"Probably Sabbath ghouls," I clarified. "Also Rafe is in the basement, and apparently she thinks we aren't going to cooperate. You know it's best if we don't go with the car, if we just walk there, taking back yards or something."

"You don't think we're going to be a little obvious carrying all these weapons through a residential neighborhood?" she asked, surprised.

"Cars are more obvious," I pointed out.

"Why don't we all get in one car," she suggested. "We can park a few houses away and go the rest of the way on foot."

"That's a good idea," I agreed, happy that we were making plans at last. "Actually we could get in the back of the truck, it would make it easier to get out once we're there. I'll get out right now." I leaned forward to go around Alex, but Scott pulled me back against him.

"We're in the truck," he reminded me.

"But not in the back," I protested.

"We're fine." The tone of his voice told me that he wasn't going to argue about it with me.

Madelynne and Logan got out of her car and reached into the backseat for their weapons and supplies. A moment later they walked toward the back of the truck and climbed in, joined by a large dog Alex told me was Barkley.

I reached back and opened the back window of the truck so I could talk to Madelynne. "Can we go now?"

She ignored the question and started talking about tactics. "Chances are there's a side door. Given the neighborhood they might have a sliding glass door, if not there will be a way in the back."

"We can always go in through a window," I suggested. At that moment I saw that the Salem group seemed ready to go. Jason looked toward the truck and I caught his eye, gesturing that he should come over. "What's the plan?" I asked when he joined us.

"We all pick a side," he said softly. "Something moves we shoot it, unless it's one of the ghouls."

Sounded like a plan to me. "Okay, so what sides do we get?"

He shrugged. "I don't know, Michael and I are going in the side."

"Given the neighborhood there's probably not a back door," Madelynne told him. "There'll be a side door where the drive is."

"Then you guys go in the side door."

"There may be a back porch with a slider," she added. "Logan, Barkley and I will take the front."

I shot her an irritated look in her direction. "You're going in the front door?"

"I'm not going to go alone," she shot back pointedly. "We're not going to let one person run into the house alone."

"She's cleared an entire house before," Jason murmured.

"An entire house of Sabbath and their ghouls?" she demanded.

"Well, they weren't all Sabbath," he replied with a smile.

As good as I seemed to be at defending myself, I couldn't quite believe that I could clear an entire house of Kindred and ghouls by myself.

"We weren't about to let her go running off by herself," she told him, "which is exactly what she wanted to do. She was ready to go through the window of the car and into this house alone. Not waiting for backup, not with a plan."

I met Jason's reproachful look with a steady one of my own. "We have to get them out," I replied firmly.

"Getting yourself killed on the way is not a good thing," he chastised me.

"That was our thought," Madelynne told him. "We thought maybe waiting was a good idea."

He nodded. "Well, we're ready now, let's go have some fun."

"We're going to drive halfway down," she added. "We'll meet you there."

# Have No Fear

There is no turning back now  
You've woken up the demon in me  
Disturbed - Down With the Sickness

A few minutes later Scott pulled into a house where no one was home. He killed the engine, and Madelynne warned all of us to leave our phones in the truck. The others had chosen to walk to the target house, with the exception of Ralph and his goons, who had parked just down the street from the drive we'd chosen to park in.

We crossed the street silently. Scott, Alex and I headed for the back of the house while Madelynne, Logan and Barkley went up the front steps. We'd made arrangements to go into the house simultaneously, with a catcall being the signal.

The only door on the side of the house was a screen door to the Florida room off the back. I debated whether to go in that door or one of the basement windows, but the later didn't seem prudent.

A moment after we were in position at the side door, Brenda and James hopped a fence from the neighbor's yard. They took up an offensive stance near the sliding glass door that led off the Florida room, and studied the security panel that was on the interior wall.

I opened up the mental link to Brenda thinking that we should try and coordinate our actions. *Where's Jason?* came out first.

*Somewhere around the house,* she replied. *I can't talk to him like this.*

*Okay, do you have a preset signal to go in?* I asked.

She raised the Ingram and pointed it at the window. *Just this.*

*Wait!* I called, raising my hands frantically. *Let's coordinate things.* To my relief she stopped before pulling the trigger. A moment later I heard the catcall I'd been expecting and screamed *Now!* into her mind as I reached for the door near me.

The noise from the Ingram split the night, covering the sounds of the screen door being pulled off its hinges. Brenda and I entered as one, and while she ripped the security control panel from the wall I gestured for Scott to boost me up to a window that led into the kitchen of the house.

I broke the glass but before I could get more than halfway through I saw a man standing in the dining room start to turn in my direction. I fired, hitting him in the throat. The phosphorous exploded, and he fell to the floor, dying. Gunfire rang through the house, telling me that he wasn't the only one dying here tonight.

Once I was through the window I moved quickly toward what I figured was the door to the basement steps. Scott and Alex came through the window and followed just a few steps behind me. The door was closed, and I stood to one side while I opened it. When I heard more gunfire from the basement, I glanced around the doorjamb, but there was no one there.

I rounded the corner and saw Brenda and James near the bottom of the steps. Gunfire rang out again and Brenda's body rocked with the impact of bullets hitting her chest. She fell against James who did his best to catch her one handed while he fired past her into the basement.

As I moved down the stairs I saw someone chained upright to a post near the bottom. I didn't want to look, but I knew I had to see who it was. When I neared the bottom I saw that it was Petor

and time started to crawl. Distantly I heard someone screaming his name as I pushed my way past Brenda and James to the bottom of the stairs.

It felt like I had all the time in the world to stand on that bottom step and look at Petor and his injuries. Bruises covered his face and his clothing was ripped and bloodstained. Thankfully he seemed to be unconscious and therefore spared the agony he would otherwise be feeling. I refused to consider the fact that he may be dead.

I was vaguely aware that James had fired into the wall near the bottom of the stairs. I felt Brenda brush past me and move into the center of the basement. Although the gunshots rang out all around me, I wasn't afraid for my own safety. My mind was filled with the terror that my boys were beyond my ability to help them.

Time started moving quickly again, and it seemed only a heartbeat later that I was standing near Petor, shielding his body from the vampire who was shooting at me from the center of the room. Pain exploded in my chest but I did my best to ignore it. I could feel Scott moving up to my right and together we fired at the vampire. Somewhere on the other side of Petor I heard another gun go off, and between the three weapons the vampire was toast. He fell to the ground and didn't move again.

I turned quickly to scan the basement, but there were no bad guys left to kill and I didn't see Frasier anywhere. Holstering my weapon, I ripped apart the chains that held Petor with my bare hands. Scott caught him and lowered him carefully to the ground.

Turning his head for better access to his pulse, I saw that someone had fed from him and not bothered to close the wound. My anger rose another notch as I carefully felt for his artery. Thankfully his pulse was there, although weak.

From the looks of his condition I knew I had to feed him so he could heal, but I was getting dangerously low on blood myself. Then I remembered the cross and the crystals inside, and I quickly picked it up and hit the catch to open it. I ran my fingers across five of the blood filled beads and instantly felt much more in control of myself.

I bit into my wrist and held the bleeding wound to Petor's mouth. He swallowed and I could see the bruises on his face begin to heal. I couldn't afford to give him much vitae but he looked better when I finally pulled away. He still wasn't awake, but his pulse was much stronger.

What I had to focus on now was finding Frasier and getting them both out of the house. Once that was done I could concentrate on killing what was left of the Sabbat. Madelynne had seemed reluctant to participate on the raid, but I knew I had to see it through to its completion. There was no way I was going to walk away from the house and leave any Sabbat member still alive. They'd picked the wrong Kindred's ghouls to fuck with, and they were going to pay. Blood for blood.

I looked up to find Madelynne standing over me. "We have to kill them all," I said in a hard voice. "They can't be allowed to do this again."

"Yes," she agreed softly.

She moved off behind me and I looked around for Frasier. He was lying at Jason's feet across the room, not moving. As I watched, Jason raised his gun and fired toward someone, but apparently he missed. A heartbeat later another Kindred was on him, grabbing his right arm. Jason dropped his gun and claws sprang from the ends of his fingers, but he couldn't stop the man from snapping his arm.

"Take care of Petor," I told Scott quickly before sprinting across the room.

The vampire punched Jason in the face and he fell back, but somehow managed to keep his feet. I ran up behind the bad guy and laid the barrel of the Desert Eagle at the base of his skull. Unfortunately he moved before I could pull the trigger and the bullet flew into the basement wall.

Jason turned and raked him across the chest. I readied myself to move quickly, but out of nowhere Scott was on the man, slashing claws across his throat. The vampire's head went flying while his body fell to the floor

Immediately I knelt to check on Frasier, who was thankfully alive but barely conscious. He too had bite marks on his neck, but he also had blood on his mouth as if someone had fed him. I hoped it had been Jason, and that he'd fed him enough to sustain him for now.

I looked up at Scott, who didn't seem to have any new injuries. "Where's Petor?"

"Alex took him back to the truck," he assured me, kneeling by my side.

Nodding, I turned to make sure Jason was okay. He wasn't, his arm was bent at a bad angle, obviously broken. "You're hurt," I exclaimed. "Are you going to be okay?"

He threw his arm to the side and it straightened with a snap. "Ow." He took a step closer to me but stopped and turned his head away. "Do you mind putting the—"

At that moment an agonized scream filled the room and Jason went running toward the sound. I wanted to follow him, but my ghoul's health was a priority at the moment. Scott lifted Frasier's arm around his shoulders and helped me get him to his feet. I gave my ghoul the Desert Eagle, but he didn't have the strength to lift it.

"Are you going to be okay?" I asked softly, lifting his head so I could look into his eyes. "Do you need blood to heal?"

"Hmm?" There was a dazed look in his eyes that I didn't like at all. The bruises on his face were horrible, and now I could see at least two sets of bite marks on his neck. He was only on his feet because Scott had an arm around his waist.

"Here." I bit into my arm and held it up to his mouth. "Feed," I ordered.

Obediently he began to drink, bringing his free hand up to hold my wrist against his mouth. I was getting dangerously low on blood so I couldn't let him drink long, but at least when I licked the wound closed his eyes looked more focused and he had a better grip on the gun.

Now that Frasier was stable, I had business to take care of. "Take care of him," I told Scott before pulling a Glock and turning to follow Jason across the room.

Zach was standing behind everyone else with Archie right next to him. The Tremere looked like he was in a deep trance, but Archie appeared ready to spring at any moment. Madelynne and Logan stood near the far wall of the basement, weapons trained on enemies I couldn't yet see. Barkley was at Logan's side, crouched over with claws bared, waiting for an opportunity to strike.

Brenda and Michael were standing near the middle of the collapsed wall looking very tense. Jason was closest to me, but I didn't understand why he wasn't in the thick of things. When I turned the corner and the scene was fully revealed, I knew.

Rafe was captive against a cross in the center of the room. His hands were nailed to the cross beam, and had chains draped around him at several points on his body. A large tattooed woman held his neck in one clawed hand while the other was nearly drawing blood on his chest. Roger stood behind them, a satisfied look on his face.

I edged between James and the wall, hoping I wouldn't be noticed and could fire at the ghoul who was aiming across the room at Logan. James obviously had the same idea, for his weapon was already trained on the dark haired man.

"So what is your answer?" Roger demanded.

"Take me instead," Brenda pleaded.

"Brenda, no," Michael gasped.

"Instead of Michael?" Roger drawled with an insolent smile. "Hardly worth it."

"Are you not missing Akari's presence in your little circle of friends?" she asked, lowering her gun and taking a step forward.

Michael grabbed her arm and pulled her back. "Brenda, no, don't do this."

The woman had finished a row of shallow bleeding scratches across Rafe's chest and moved her hand to begin another. Michael eyed the wounds and put his gun away, stepping forward.

"If it's me you want then fine," he said bravely. "Let him go."

"Drop the weapon," Roger ordered.

Slowly he pulled his gun with two fingers and turned to hand it to Brenda, giving her a look that spoke volumes before looking again to Roger.

"Do you think I'm a fool, boy?" the Lasombra barked harshly. "I said drop it."

When the tips of the woman's nails entered Rafe's throat, Michael knew he had no choice.

"Brenda drop the gun," he ordered tensely as the weapon fell from her hand.

"And the rest of them too," Roger demanded. "All of you."

Michael slowly reached for his weapons but I knew that if we followed the Lasombra's directions we were all going to die anyway. The Sabbath ghoul saved us from making that decision when he screamed in agony, blood erupting from every orifice in his body.

I pulled a gun and edged forward, hoping for a shot at Roger while others fired at the woman in an effort to get her away from Rafe. Barkley launched at her, pulling her off of the ghoul. Unfortunately she'd had a good hold in the boy and his neck was now ripped open and bleeding.

Brenda screamed Rafe's name as Michael sprinted to stand between him and the remaining Sabbath. Roger flung a shadow in his direction and Michael went flying back into Brenda. Using the power of my blood, I sprinted toward Roger, hoping to get behind him and blow him away before he saw me.

Unfortunately, things didn't go as I'd planned. Black tendrils whipped up from around the Lasombra's ankles and flung back toward me. I lost my gun on impact with the wall, and was held helplessly against the hard cement surface.

The world swam around me and I struggled to stay focused. I knew I needed to heal the damage I'd just taken, but I was getting dangerously low on blood. If I frenzied, there was no telling who I'd take out before I calmed down. I struggled against the shadowy arms holding me down, but my strength was gone. There was nothing I could do but watch everyone else fight for their lives, and mine.

To my amazement, the cross holding Rafe was mystically torn from the pole and levitated above the combatants to land behind them on the basement floor. James had been trying to help Rafe, and

he was moved too. I saw him bend over the ghoul as Archie jumped over Brenda and Michael to launch himself at the female vampire.

Michael ran toward Roger, staying to the right so he wouldn't have to go through anyone to get to him. Logan and Madelynn moved forward, each firing. I saw Roger get hit and immediately a dark wall sprung up between him and most of the others.

I could see Jason moving toward Roger and bit my lip to stop from screaming at him to get out of there. Michael and Logan moved forward simultaneously and shot at Roger again, and this time he went down. The black wall dropped like a curtain and I felt the shadows around me loosen, but it wasn't enough for me to break free.

Madelynn fired at Roger and he dropped like a stone to the floor. The wall of darkness holding me was weakening, but it was far from broken. I pulled at my constraints, but I still couldn't break free, which meant Roger wasn't dead.

Jason reached Roger's side first, but before he could raise his arm to strike Michael laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Excuse me Jason, let me have the honor," he said firmly. "You should see to your wife." With that he fell to his knees and, in a savage motion, ripped Roger's head from his body. He knelt there with his hands on his knees, looking down at the remains for a long time.

## Aftershocks

I can pretend that I'm not confused  
And I don't need the likes of you  
Fuel - Scar

Madelynne and Logan managed to reach me just as the shadows dissipated. They caught me before I fell and guided me gently to the floor.

"Are they dead?" I whispered, trying to look past them for any enemies that might still be alive. Madelynne eased my shirt up to check the wounds on my chest. "Yeah."

"All of them?"

"I think so." She motioned for Logan to move me forward so she could check my back, but I knew exactly how hurt I was and what I needed to fix it.

"Help me get the cross open," I told her. I was desperately low on blood, and the hunger was a raging fire inside me.

She reached inside my shirt and pulled out the Celtic cross. After a moment's fumbling, we got it open and I ran my finger across more of the swirling crystals. Wondering if I could get someone to show me how to refill the beads, I healed what injuries I could and sat back in relief.

Jason walked toward us. "Are you—" He stopped suddenly and turned his head away.

"Sorry." Quickly I closed the cross and tucked it back inside my shirt. "Yeah, I'm okay. Are you okay?"

He looked down at the blood on his clothes and gave me a wry grin that showed his still extended fangs. "I don't think I'm gonna live."

I looked around, but I didn't see Scott or Frasier anywhere. "The boys," I asked Madelynne frantically, "are the boys okay?"

"I'll send Barkley to make sure the boys made it out," she soothed, helping me to my feet.

"Thank you," I breathed as she and Logan moved away to give Jason and I a little privacy. "Are you going to stay like that all night?" I asked him, gesturing toward the long claws still extending from his fingers.

With a start he realized that he still had teeth and claws out. "I guess I'm still a little shook up." His claws morphed back into normal fingernails and his teeth got smaller, but not like they should have. While not fully extended, they were definitely more pronounced than they'd been before the battle. I walked closer to him just to make sure I was seeing them right. "What?" he asked, obviously wondering what I was looking at.

I motioned toward my own mouth. "You got a little upset there," I murmured, reaching up to lay a hand on his cheek and feel the point of one of his teeth with my thumb. Members of the Gangrel clan retain an animalistic mark each time they frenzy, which meant that he must have frenzied here tonight.

He seemed surprised that I'd touched him, but his hand automatically moved to my side. "Are you sure you're okay?" he asked softly.

I stepped back, confused by his touch. "Yeah, well, a couple of claw marks and a gunshot wound, but I'll be okay," I said dismissively.

"I feel that one," he murmured. "Let's go see how Frasier is."

"Scott's taking care of him," I told him, looking around. "They went upstairs, I think."

"At least he's walking on his own," he said, relieved.

"Yeah." I was grateful for that myself. "We gotta find his stuff and Petor's stuff and get out of here."

He smiled at my take-charge attitude. "Okay, hon."

I shot him a confused look, but Barkley had come back and I wanted to make sure the boys were all right. He told me that Scott and Alex had gotten them into the car and were headed back to the pub where they'd be safe. I breathed a sigh of relief and turned to look around for the boys' equipment. I was particularly worried about Frasier's bag of weapons.

Before I got very far on my search, I realized that there were several people kneeling around where Rafe was still attached to the cross. As I walked closer I could see that Zach was doing something to the wood to make it release the nails that were still embedded in Rafe's arms. In fact it almost looked like his flesh had healed around them.

As irritated as I'd been with him the night before, I didn't like seeing him in so much pain. "Is he going to be all right?" I asked Brenda. When she seemed in no shape to answer me, I asked the same question of her companion.

"He will live," James replied cautiously.

I stepped back when Rafe levitated as if held gently in supportive arms. Zach followed him up the stairs, followed closely by Brenda who looked like she was going to collapse. I wanted so badly to comfort her but it looked like she was already in the best of hands. Michael walked but a step behind her, watching her carefully.

A quick search of the house revealed that the three ghouls' personal items were stacked on the dining room table, including their phones and the keys to the rental vehicles parked outside. It took a little longer to find Frasier's bag, but soon we had everything and headed outside. Barkley said his goodbyes and headed off into the night. The rest of us gathered in the driveway.

Rafe had been bundled into the back of the rental sedan, and Brenda was standing nervously next to the door. Michael had a hand on her arm and was trying to sooth her while James was moving some things from the back seat into the trunk.

"All right, let's get out of here," Madelynne said firmly. She looked to the Salem people. "Are you guys going back to the hotel?"

I looked at her in surprise. "Did you want them to come with us?"

"If they want they can," she offered. "It's a little bit safer than the hotel."

"A little more secure," I agreed, looking at Brenda, "and we've got facilities for first aide."

"A hospital would probably be the best," Jason replied.

I raised an eyebrow at him. "You want to explain this?"

Brenda turned to Zach. "Is there somewhere we can take him?"

"He is a Tremere ghoul," he said softly. "He is welcome in both chantries."

"We'll take him to the nearest one then," she replied, only slightly relieved.

I looked at Jason. "What are you doing?"

"I'm following you," he announced.

I didn't have the patience to argue with him, I just wanted to make sure my boys were safe. "Is it okay if he goes with me?" I asked Madelynne.

"You've got to ride with him," she replied dryly. "That's your choice."

Brenda looked hesitantly at Michael. "Are you—"

"I'm going with you," he informed her, glancing worriedly into the car. "We have to make sure he's okay." He put a hand on her arm. "Are you okay? Do you need blood? I have plenty, dear."

"No, I have provisions in the other car," she said, turning to look toward the doctor's office where they had left the other rental vehicle.

"I'll get them for you," he promised.

She turned to me. "Depending on what kind of blood I can get, I'll come to the pub after Rafe is stabilized and performed the ritual," she offered.

I couldn't stand to see the worry and pain in her eyes. "It'll be okay," I said softly. I had every confidence that the Tremere would be able to help her husband.

"The ritual can wait until tomorrow evening," Madelynne told her.

She shook her head. "I want to get him back to Salem as soon as possible."

"Are you sure you want to do this tonight?" Michael asked.

"I'm sure," she replied firmly. "I want to get him home."

"Make sure he's okay first," I told her. "Call us when he's stable."

She nodded and got into the back seat with her husband. James and Michael climbed into the front of the car and they headed out, the rest of us close behind them.

I couldn't stop thinking about the boys on the way home. It was my fault they'd been hurt, I hadn't keep a close enough eye on them. It wouldn't be fair to confine them to the pub during the day, but I couldn't see anyway to make sure they'd be safe while the sun was in the sky.

Abruptly I realized that Jason had been trying to get my attention for several minutes.

"I'm sorry," I said softly, trying to keep the strain out of my voice. "I'm just really worried about the boys."

"I understand," he replied gently. "I'm sure they'll be fine. Just concentrate on driving."

The rest of our trip was spent in silence. When I pulled into the parking lot behind Madelynne and Logan in the truck, I was dismayed to see Ralph pulling in behind me. "Jesus fucking Christ," I muttered darkly as I parked the Suburban next to Logan. "I am not up for another battle tonight."

"What is it?" Jason asked softly.

"Ralph and his bunch," I growled, running a hand lightly across the claw marks on my stomach. "They were here earlier. Well, not these guys, but the other ones."

He looked back at the truck that had parked behind me as I pulled the Glock 22 from the small of my back. When I reached for the door handle, he placed a hand on my leg. I tried not to jump and looked over at him.

"He stopped by earlier to offer his help with the Sabbat," he told me hesitantly. "He also wanted to strike a deal about taking her out."

Somehow I'd forgotten what Brenda had said earlier about Ralph visiting them at the hotel. I didn't have to ask to know he was talking about Madelynne. "Oh, yeah, I remember Brenda saying something about him coming by," I said dryly. "Did you get your thirty pieces of silver?"

He shook his head gravely. "Just because I don't trust someone doesn't mean that they are wrong," he said fiercely, "and no, we didn't sell you out."

Angrily I lifted up my shirt so he could see the deep furrows Mary had left in my flesh. "You see these? His group, earlier tonight."

As he looked down at my wounds, something shifted behind his eyes. It looked a lot like rage. "Let's take care of this," he growled.

I raised the gun and set a bullet in the chamber. "Let's." I stepped out of the Suburban and joined Madelynne beside the truck.

"We have more than one problem here," she said softly. "Patrick's here."

I'd never heard the name before. "Patrick is...?"

"Who's Patrick?" Jason asked as he and Logan joined us.

"He's my sire," she replied gravely.

I raised an eyebrow. "And this is bad because...?"

"Asshole," Logan growled.

"He resents me," she added.

"You have this habit of turning people against you, Madelynne," I teased her gently. "What is up with that?"

"You tend to make people not trust you," Jason added.

"It's not that he distrusts me," she said quickly, "he dislikes me."

I had to admit there was a difference. "Let's take care of Ralph, then we'll deal with Patrick."

She nodded and walked toward the back of the truck. We followed, and I did my best to keep the gun in my hand out of sight. Ralph was standing near the back of Logan's truck with Brett on his right. Britt was standing behind the men, glaring at Logan.

"What do you want?" Madelynne demanded.

"I have a business arrangement with our friend Jason," Ralph drawled.

Madelynne looked past me to shoot Jason a dark look. "What is this business arrangement?"

"He told me about this," I said softly.

"And you are?" Ralph asked me disdainfully.

"My wife," Jason answered, his voice full of warning.

"None of your goddamn concern," I growled back at Ralph. I didn't need Jason to defend or protect me.

"You're not of our concern either, bitch," he shot back, pointing at Madelynne. "She's the one we're after."

Jason bristled, but I ignored his anger to join Logan in standing between Ralph and Madelynne. To my surprise I felt her hand on my shoulder, easing me to the side.

"This really doesn't concern you," she said softly.

"You're part of the pack," I reminded her. "It concerns me."

"I understand that," she replied, "but—"

I turned to look at her. "You know, me and Scott, right there, security."

"Scott," she repeated meaningfully. She didn't have to tell me twice.

"I gotta check on the boys anyway," I said with a nod. "Patrick's in there, no telling what's going on. Stay with these guys," I told Jason as I quickly backed away. "I'll be right back."

I sprinted for the door of the bar and threw it open. Instantly everyone inside turned to look at me. Everyone turned out to be all of the remaining pack members, and two Kindred I didn't recognize sitting in a booth against the wall. I ignored them and went to Scott. "Ghouls?" I asked quickly.

"Upstairs resting," he told me, turning back to Patrick.

I nodded in relief. "Okay, you're needed outside," I told him. When he shot me a look of disbelief, I simply added, "Ralph."

That one word was all it took, he was out the door like a flash. I headed after him and by the time I reached the action, Jason had closed ranks with Madelynne and Scott was standing to Logan's right, claws out and baseball bat in hand.

"But now you owe me, boy," Ralph stated harshly.

"I don't owe anything for no deal was made, boy," Jason shot back more than a little impatiently.

"You feeling lucky?" he demanded.

"Well, I just took out a Lasombra," Jason drawled.

"Yeah, I see that," Ralph drawled derisively, "and you didn't, your Ventrue friend did."

Madelynne cleared her throat. "Actually I did."

I came to a stop standing to Ralph's left, facing him. "Technically Michael took the head off," I corrected dryly. "Has it occurred to you that you're outnumbered?"

"Well, this little boy here who reneged on his deal," Ralph growled.

"No deal was made," Jason insisted.

"Let's go." The primogen threw off his jacket and extended both claws and fangs. "Or you gonna hide behind your wife?"

When Jason stepped forward I couldn't believe he was accepting the challenge. Ralph was older and looked bigger than Jason, but I wasn't sure who would win. I knew Jason had used and spent blood earlier tonight, and I wasn't sure if he'd been able to heal his injuries. I wanted so badly to raise my gun and shoot Ralph, but this was to be a duel between the two of them so I knew I had no right to interfere.

## *Not So Fast*

What makes you think  
That I don't see  
the ways you made a fool of me?  
Enrique Iglesias - I Will Survive

I was saved from deciding whether or not to interfere by three vehicles pulling into the parking lot. The first and last were large black nondescript Suburbans and the second was a long black limousine. Thankfully I wasn't the only one to notice. Gradually everyone but Jason and Ralph retracted their claws and the tension level dropped perceptibly.

When Ralph finally noticed the change, he glanced around to see the limo and the security personnel filling out of the Suburbans. "Ah, the prince and his pets are here," he drawled. "You're lucky, boy," he told Jason as his claws melded back into his fingers and he relaxed his fighting stance.

Once the primogen had backed down, Jason did the same and reached for his jacket. By the time the prince and his bodyguards reached us, the only weapons in sight were Madelynne and Logan's guns, and Scott's baseball bat.

"Is this a party?" the prince drawled.

"We were followed by them," Madelynne told him. "Ralph came to Jason asking to make a deal, he'd help them kill me, they'd help him kill the Sabbat."

"No deal was actually made," Jason growled.

"Nothing was shaken on," she conceded, "but you know Ralph well enough that he held up his end of the bargain, now he's requiring him to hold up his. Basically they're here to kill me."

"Well if the deal was struck," the prince said dryly, "far be it from me to interfere."

"No deal was struck, my prince," Jason insisted. "Just offered."

"He does not understand Ralph's rules, or lack of them," Madelynne continued. "Ralph held up what he said he would do and now is asking him to hold up his end."

"But the Sabbat are gone," the Frenchman prompted.

"What we have found," Jason added.

"My people are cleaning the house as we speak," the prince announced. "I stopped by wishing to congratulate Mrs. Brown on a successful mission, but she is nowhere to be found at the moment."

"She's at the Tremere chantry," I put in respectfully. "Her husband was injured quite critically."

"City or country?" he asked.

"City."

"Pity," he mumbled.

I raised an eyebrow. "Is there a problem with the city chantry?"

"None that you need to concern yourself with," he said condescendingly. "The leadership of the chantry is in questionable hands." With that he turned to Ralph and regarded him for a moment. "Be a good boy Rafael and go home."

Cassidy smirked and even Casilde snickered a little as Ralph grudgingly turned to his truck and got inside, followed by his companions. With a last glaring look in our direction, he started the truck and left.

"If you see Mrs. Brown," the Frenchman declared, "tell her congratulations on a job well done."

I nodded. "She is expected here later."

"I have business to attend to," he told me.

Not that I'd expected him to wait around for her. "We'll be sure to pass along your message when we see her."

He thanked me dismissively, and a few moments later he was climbing into the limo with Cassidy and Casilde right behind him. I was glad he'd shown up to break up the fight, but now I was just as happy to see the end of him.

"We have another problem to take care of yet," Madelynne reminded us as the three vehicles pulled out of the lot. "Or rather I do." When she started for the front of the pub, Scott and Logan caught up and did their best to stay a little a head of her with Jason and I following behind.

Patrick was standing in the doorway leaning against one side, watching Madelynne approach. I really didn't like the possessive look in his eye.

"Can we kill him?" I hissed at her.

"Stop being so trigger-happy," she admonished me. When she was within striking distance of her sire, she stopped and glared at him. "What do you want?"

He smiled charmingly. "Just came looking for you, honey."

"Well you found me, what do you want?" she demanded.

"Thought maybe we could talk," he said with a shrug.

"There's nothing to talk about."

"Sure there is," he countered. "I want you back."

She laughed dryly. "Not gonna happen." When he just stood there eating her with his eyes, she added, "Did you ever think there was a reason I left?"

"I don't know," he drawled pleasantly. "You didn't tell me."

"Obsessive control freak," she growled irritably. "Help at all?"

"Oh come on," he wheedled, "were things really that bad?"

"No," she shot back, "they were worse." She stepped to one side, opened the other door and walked through, followed closely by the rest of us.

Patrick stood there and let us pass as if unconcerned, but when I walked by I noticed that he had at least one gun hidden beneath his jacket. I hoped he tried to use it, I still had some aggressions that I needed to get out of my system.

Alex was sitting at the bar with Maggie, who was clinging nervously to his arm. Howard was at his usual table with his computers set up around him, while Jolie and Lucas were doing some cleaning near the rear of the pub. Carissa was behind the bar watching us approach, but Emily was nowhere to be seen. The only other people in the room were Patrick and a Kindred woman sitting in a booth on the other side of the room.

As we reached the bar I stepped up next to Madelynne's left and looked at Scott. "They're upstairs?"

"Yeah," he assured me.

Jason came up to the bar on my left, but he was looking over at Howard's table at the electronics spread out in front of him. I wondered for a moment if he was into that kind of thing, but I had more important to think about at the moment.

"We'd like something to drink," Madelynne told Carissa. "Just us here."

I watched Patrick walk over to the booth with the woman I'd noticed earlier. She brushed her dark hair over her shoulder and looked up at him with dark eyes as he sat down. "Can we kill him?" I muttered.

"No," Madelynne said irritably before she realized I wasn't entirely serious. "You've shot enough stuff in here," she added calmly. "They've just gotten it cleaned up."

Maggie joined us and started fussing over our injuries one at a time. She started with Madelynne and Logan then moved on to Scott and me. She turned to Jason but quickly realized who he was and stepped back to Scott's side, laying a hand on his arm.

"We're all fine," Madelynne assured her. "How long has he been here?" she asked Carissa.

"About a half hour." Sunglasses covered the woman's eyes tonight, but I could tell she was watching Patrick's table.

"Has he said anything to anyone?"

She shook her head. "Just looking for you."

"So he said outside," Madelynne murmured as she took a drink from the blood Carissa placed in front of her.

I took the glass she sat in front of me and downed its contents quickly before setting it back on the bar. "Well, if there's nothing life and death going on down here, I'm going to go check on the boys," I told Madelynne. I knew they were safe, but I had to see it for myself.

She nodded and Maggie latched onto my arm. "Oh, I'll come with you," she said quickly. I knew she was nervous with all the strangers and tension in the room, so I placed my hand over hers reassuringly.

"Is Emily upstairs?" I asked as we headed for the stairs.

"Yeah." She glanced at Jason when we passed him, but didn't say anything more.

We passed Emily on stairs, and she paused to look at the blood on my shirt. "Oh, are you hurt dear?"

"I'll be all right," I assured her with a wan smile. "How are the boys?"

"Resting," she assured me. "That new one of yours is rather striking."

There was no polite way to tell her to keep her hands off my ghoul, so I just nodded and thanked her before leading Maggie upstairs. Both of the boys were out, thankfully enough. I made sure both of them were well covered with blankets and touched their foreheads to check for fever, but they both seemed fine. Someone with medical skill had set up IV's on each of them, and I suspected that they'd been sedated so they would rest and heal.

Maggie followed me back to my room and while I changed my clothes we talked a bit about what had happened outside. Feeling the hunger burn inside of me, I took the time to open the cross once more and use what was left of the swirling beads to ease my thirst.

I was nearly ready to go back downstairs when I heard a knock at the door. Normally I'd have just called out for whomever it was to enter, but since there was a possibility it may have been Jason, I asked who it was. When Madelynne identified herself, I invited her in.

"How are they doing?" she asked softly.

"All right I guess," I shrugged. I hadn't liked the way they looked, but then again they seemed better than they'd been when we'd found them.

"Alex has probably taken care of them," she told me.

"Someone has," I agreed. "I feel a little better knowing they're okay. They're both out of it."

"He may have given them something to sleep," she mused. "They'll heal faster if they're resting."

"I kinda wanted to talk to them, but it's best if they sleep." I slid my on boots and stood up. "So is Patrick still...?"

"No," she said with a worried frown. "I think he's going to stay in Detroit."

"You should have let me kill him," I joked with a dry smile. "Is Jason still here?" I glanced behind her as if he'd be standing in the hall waiting, but there was no one there.

"Yeah, he's with Howard," she told me. "He seems awfully interested in Howard's toys."

"Really?" Perhaps that was why the technoweenie's things had seemed familiar to me.

Madelynne excused herself to change and I took a few moments to weed out all of the holy objects from my necklaces. At the last moment I put the Celtic cross on and tucked it under my shirt, just in case Jason decided to get a little too friendly.

After checking once more on the boys, Maggie and I met Madelynne on the second floor and we went downstairs together. A quick glance around showed that everyone was still there and safe. Logan was talking to Carissa. Emily was standing near Alex at the end of the bar watching Jason, who was pacing nearby. Scott was in the back of the pub playing pool in an aggressive way that worried me.

Maggie went off to talk to Alex while Madelynne and I walked over to Howard. He had a stack of paper on the chair next to him, and was looking intently at the screen of his laptop.

"Are these the phone things?" Madelynne asked, pointing to the stack of papers.

"Yes," he replied without looking up.

"Were you able to get a hold of any of the money for her?"

"It's an indefinite funds account," he informed us. "There's no upper limit, but I stopped at fifteen grand. I've put it in your account for now."

At least something was going right. I grinned at Madelynne. "Can I go shopping?"

"Do you have anything else for him to check into for you?" she asked me as Jason joined us.

"If we wait until after Brenda shows up, I might actually remember something," I murmured.

"What do you need?" Jason asked.

"Money," I replied simply. There were a lot of other things I needed as well, but money would go a long way.

"Use your card," he suggested.

Not that I had a card. "Let me just show you the card I woke up with," I said dryly, holding my empty hand out palm up.

"You had nothing?"

"I had two hundred dollars in American money," I corrected, "and about the same in Russian rubles."

He took out his wallet, pulled a credit card from inside, and handed it to me. "Use this," he suggested. "It's from a joint account."

"Do you want to go talk to Alex about the guys?" Madelynne asked me. When I nodded, the three of us walked to the end of the bar where he was sitting.

"They suffered severe blood loss," he told us gravely. "They were both beat up pretty bad, lots of bruises."

"Were they awake at all?" I asked.

"They were, but I gave them something to sleep. They'll be sore for a day or two, but they'll be okay." He smiled reassuringly. "Neither of them suffered any permanent injury."

My sigh of relief was a little premature.

"Are they going to be mentally out of it?" Jason asked.

Alex's smile faded. "That's another story."

"Frasier seems pretty strong," Jason told me, "but I don't know this Petor guy. I think Frasier's going to come out of it and be pissed that we killed them all without him."

"How long ago did you sedate them?" Madelynne asked Alex.

"Maybe half an hour," he replied. "They'll be out until tomorrow."

"Is there someone who can sit with them during the day?" I asked.

"We can probably have Lucas or Jolie do it," Alex agreed. "Or I can give them something to keep them asleep all day."

"I just would feel better if someone would stay with them," I admitted, "but if you could sedate them it would be fine too. Thank you." I glanced toward the back of the bar where Scott was still manhandling the pool cue. Now that I knew the boys were okay, I wanted to make sure he was all right before I talked to Jason. "Excuse me for a moment."

Without waiting for his reply I went over to the pool table. Scott didn't look up when I reached him, just kept hitting the cue ball around the table like it was Ralph's face. "You okay?" I asked softly.

He shrugged and watched the balls roll to a stop. "Blowing off steam."

"But you're okay?" I insisted. "I just want to make sure you're not going to go off and kill the next thing that walked in the door."

He glanced up at me, then behind me toward where I knew Jason was waiting before leaning over the table again. "I'm fine."

I nodded, knowing I wasn't going to get any other answer out of him, not in the mood he was in. Still, he was a big boy and while I felt like it sometimes, I sure as hell wasn't his mother. I turned and went back to where Jason was waiting for me. "Can I have a word with you?" I asked. "Maybe outside, alone?"

When he agreed, I led the way to the door, pausing only long enough to make sure he was behind me before stepping outside.

## Close To You

The doors you open  
I just can't close

U2 - Whose Gonna Ride Your Wild Horses

I was tense as I walked out into the parking lot. I really wasn't sure I wanted to be alone with Jason, but it was too late to turn back now.

"You do look like hell," he drawled softly. The look on his face belied his words, made me feel beautiful.

"Ditto," I replied to both the words he'd said and the emotion behind them. Although a few minutes ago he'd been as eager as I to have this moment alone, now he seemed at a loss for words. I wasn't sure what it was he'd wanted to say, but I knew I did. "Did you feed Frasier?" I asked softly.

"I had to," he replied simply.

"Thank you," I whispered, grateful that he'd been there to help my ghoul when I hadn't been.

"Frasier and I have counted on each other during the last year," he told me. "I couldn't *not* help him." He stepped forward to lay a hand on my shoulder, but I backed out of his reach.

"What happens if the ritual doesn't work?" I demanded.

"I'm hoping it does," he replied confidently.

"But what if it doesn't?"

"I don't know," he admitted.

"Can you accept me the way that I am?" I insisted. "Without remembering Christina, without remembering this faery tale Salem, without any of that stuff?"

"Where we are now, you don't know me, I don't know you," he reminded me. "We would have to ditch the brat pack and the peanut gallery—"

I had to laugh at his imagery. Laughing pulled at the wounds on my stomach, but it felt good too.

"—to actually see if the new you and me are still compatible," he continued with a smile, "if we still want to be with each other."

I sobered quickly at the reminder of the distance between us. "Does it seem like that much of a stretch? Am I that much different than she was?"

"I wouldn't say different," he said carefully. "Over dramatized, maybe."

"Okay, it's been a hard three or four days," I reminded him, running a hand absently through my hair. "Actually, I don't remember what it was like before, maybe it's been an easy three or four days."

"Compared to a few times, yeah," he reluctantly agreed. "Try being on the other end of the spectrum."

"I know it's been hard for you," I admitted softly, "but it hasn't been easy for me either." I looked toward the street and tried to find the words to explain how what I was going through. "Its like you guys just want to erase everything that I am and bring back this little clone you can lead around by the nose through all the little Tremere hoops, and I don't want to be like that."

"Lead you around?" he scoffed. "No, no, no. If anything, you were the one holding the leash."

"I don't think the clan would have went for that," I replied honestly. The Tremere didn't seem like they'd put up with a young vampire like myself trying to run things.

"Like you ever followed what they said anyway," he shot back.

"I moved to Salem." I reminded him.

"I reiterate the fact that you didn't really do anything they told you to." He smiled affectionately. "You moved to Salem because Brenda wanted you to."

I raised an eyebrow in surprise. "I moved to Salem because of Brenda?"

"I'm also getting the idea that you're not caring too much for Brenda anymore," he murmured.

There was no way to put this tactfully. "She wants the clone back."

"You have to look at it from her point of view," he reasoned. "You're the only thing she has of her family close enough to hold onto. She has nothing with you gone."

"She's married," I reminded him.

"Now," he agreed. "Rafe is still a puppy. You know, there's supposedly love there, but he's fully blood bound to her. The blood is magical as you know, so he has no choice but to love her."

I could see his point. "But does he really love her?"

"Exactly. Maybe he really liked her and then the blood bond happened and boom—" The laugh he gave sounded a little like Archie. "Pretty."

If that was the way it had really happened, I couldn't help but feel sorry for Brenda. "I don't know but we're not here to talk about Brenda," I said firmly, trying to bring the conversation back on track. "We're here to talk about our relationship. I just need to know if it's even worth it to you to try if this ritual doesn't work out."

"You know, if you weren't hurt I would slap you for that remark," he said only half seriously. "If you knew of the hell that I've been through trying to get this thing back to what it was because of my fuck ups. I've gone from human to ghoul to buffet to Nosferatu and then to Gangrel and now I'm here. All the time, all of it has been for you." His eyes told me he believed what he said but there was just one problem with his argument.

"But I'm not her," I protested softly.

"You are her," he insisted. "You will always be part of her. She will always be part of you. This... Tina is part of her consciousness and is still a part of her. Everything that she was is you."

How could he be so sure that whatever had wiped my memory hadn't wiped my personality as well? What if there was nothing of her left inside of me? If that were the case, how could he love me? "But what if that never comes back?"

"Then where are you going to feel safe?" he demanded.

"It's not a matter of feeling safe," I told him honestly. "I can take care of myself no matter where I am, that's not an issue."

"I love you," he said seriously, "and the last time you said that we had to search for you for three days."

"You're still not answering my question," I shot back. "If I don't remember anything, are you willing to try and build something between us?"

"It's you, okay?" he insisted. "I'm going to try whatever I can. But I tell you I'm worried about the group that you're with."

I closed my eyes, dismayed that the subject had been broached yet again. "There's nothing wrong with the pack," I said adamantly.

"From what you see," he replied.

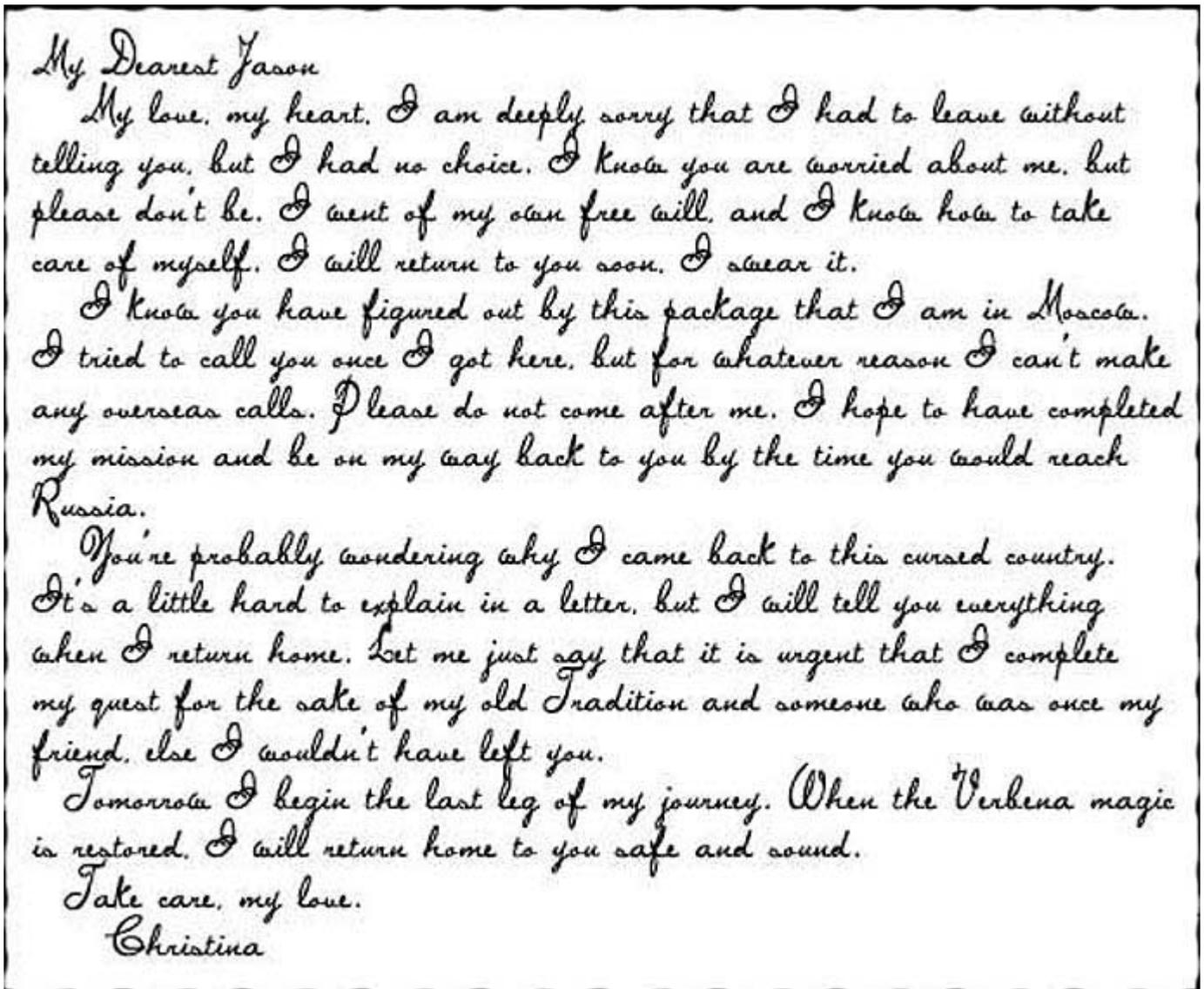
I studied his face for a long moment. "What have I ever done to make you mistrust my judgment?"

He looked me up and down a few times before answering dryly, "I believe the statement was, 'I can take care of myself, I will be right back, don't worry, everything will be fine'."

I frowned in confusion. "When did I say that?"

"In the letter you wrote me," he replied, pulling an envelope from the inner pocket of his jacket and handing it to me.

With hands that threatened to shake, I pulled the paper from the envelope and opened it to reveal my own handwriting. I read slowly, trying very hard not to let tears come to my eyes at the deep emotions evident on the page.



*My Dearest Jason*  
*My love, my heart. I am deeply sorry that I had to leave without telling you, but I had no choice. I know you are worried about me, but please don't be. I went of my own free will, and I know how to take care of myself. I will return to you soon. I swear it.*  
*I know you have figured out by this package that I am in Moscow. I tried to call you once I got here, but for whatever reason I can't make any overseas calls. Please do not come after me. I hope to have completed my mission and be on my way back to you by the time you would reach Russia.*  
*You're probably wondering why I came back to this cursed country. It's a little hard to explain in a letter, but I will tell you everything when I return home. Let me just say that it is urgent that I complete my quest for the sake of my old Tradition and someone who was once my friend, else I wouldn't have left you.*  
*Tomorrow I begin the last leg of my journey. When the Verbena magic is restored, I will return home to you safe and sound.*  
*Take care, my love.*  
*Christina*

There it was, unequivocal proof that Christina had loved this man beyond any point of reason. If I guessed correctly, she'd been protecting him by leaving on her own. It's what I would have done. I wanted to say something, anything about the obvious love she'd had for him, but whatever I might have said would have seemed trite, or forced. As much as I found Jason attractive, I couldn't honestly say I loved him.

"Would you be willing to give the pack a chance if I was willing to give you and Brenda a chance?" I offered softly as I gave him back the letter. "I'm not saying move into the pub and become a part of the family, but try?"

"I don't know," he replied honestly. "I just don't trust Madelynne. I can't say I trust her as far as I can throw her because I can probably throw her about four city blocks, but I just find it very odd that every time something came up, she wanted to mysteriously disappear."

"Every time you guys just kept going on ad infinitum about Christina and how much a paragon of virtue she was," I muttered.

"At our last meeting with the prince, she wanted to leave and then you went after her," he stated.

"No, I wanted to leave," I corrected him irritably, "and I asked her if we could."

"And I said it was a trap," he shot back, "and it turned out to be one. Whoa, big furry thing in the broom closet."

"The Sabbat's gone, okay?" I reminded him firmly. "They're not an issue anymore."

He nodded reluctantly. "I don't really trust your group. You don't really trust mine." He reached out and touched my elbow lightly. "Would you be willing to remove yourself from the Detroit area," he pleaded, "away from the Salem area, and start over, completely?"

He was asking for a hell of a lot from me. I didn't know him, didn't remember anything he kept saying we'd shared, and he wanted me to throw away everything I had for a chance at something that I couldn't honestly say I felt for him.

"You're asking me to give up the only family that I know," I said sadly.

"I'm not asking you to give them up," he assured me. "I'm asking you to spend a few weeks, maybe a month, of just you and me together, to get to know each other again. To try to get back the way we used to be."

Whatever that had been. It would be so much easier to tell where I stood if I could just remember something about this man, anything. "I don't know," I said softly.

"What would you think if you were in my place and this had happened?" he asked reasonably. "Judging by what you've seen in the last few days and your personality now, what would you do if you were in my shoes?"

I studied his face for a long moment, but I couldn't deny what was in my heart. "I would do anything I had to in order to make sure that you were safe," I admitted softly, "and to... be with you."

Although I hadn't intended it, my answer cut both ways. I knew we both had to compromise here, but the problem was I wasn't sure how much I was willing to give him. "If I agreed," I asked hesitantly, "what happens after that period of time if I still want to come back here?"

"If this is where you want to be, this is where you can be," he promised. "I'm not going to force you to do something you don't want to do." He smiled fondly. "Lord knows I couldn't before,

although you probably would have ended up with a lot less bumps and bruises if you had listened to me."

"What about the boys?" I asked, ignoring that comment.

"What about them?"

"I can't just leave them here." When he sighed in frustration, I added, "We would need someone to do the day for us."

He didn't like the idea of taking them with us, I could see it in his eyes. "Fine," he said at last. "If that is what it takes to get away then fine. We'll take the boys. I can't say that I'd be too happy to leave Frasier behind anyway."

I still wasn't sure I could leave right now. "I want to give us time to work things out, I really do," I said softly, pleading for him to understand the debate raging inside my mind. I tried to blink away the tears in my eyes, but the most I could do was stop them from falling. "But it's not fair for you to ask me to leave the pack in danger. They need me. I'm sorry if you don't appreciate that, but I have to take care of them."

"You know that the pack can take care of each other," he countered impatiently. "They've done it for years, long before you came to Detroit."

"That was before Patrick came back," I reminded him. "Before you started dealing with the enemy."

"I wasn't dealing with Ralph," he insisted. "Ralph was dealing with me."

"That may be," I admitted, "but now the pack is in more danger than they were before, and they need me here to help protect them."

"Ri-ight," he drawled.

"Are you saying that I can't help protect them?" I demanded, angry that he would think me so useless.

"You probably could help," he told me, "but if they've been in the city this long, one more isn't going to make a bit of difference. Besides, after the prince coming here I don't think he's going to be stupid enough to try anything for a while."

I wasn't going to argue with him about how much the pack needed me. "You don't know Ralph."

"And after two days you probably don't know much either," he said logically.

"I know more than you do," I shot back, holding up my shirt to show him the claw marks on my stomach. "A lot more."

He stared down at my wounds with a haunted look in his eyes that made me want to take him into my arms and comfort him. I didn't understand why he made me feel this way, but I knew I couldn't deny that I felt something for him.

"Why don't we do it this way," I suggested. "Let's do the ritual, then give it a few days. Maybe date or something like that."

"Where?" he demanded. "This city sucks. We have a prince that says we caused the problem."

"You did," I reminded him.

"They did follow Michael in," he admitted reluctantly. "Would you be willing to go away with me?"

I didn't know if I was or if I wasn't. There was no way to tell what the return of my memory would bring. "I want to wait until after the ritual to make any decisions about this," I told him softly. "I don't know what will happen when I start remembering things."

"How worried are you?" he asked glancing warily toward the door. "What happens if this ritual works and you get all your memories back and then you have your old memories and your new memories? This is who you are, and this is who you are," he said, using his hands to demonstrate his point. "The two personalities are close, but not exactly the same. How are you going to deal with that?"

"The ritual isn't supposed to return everything," I reminded him. From what I understood, it would only return parts of my memory and then only what pertains to those who 'donate' to the ritual. I suppressed a shudder at the reminder.

"I guess you don't remember," he cautioned softly, "but just because something says it's supposed to do something, doesn't always mean it's going to work that precisely. I know."

I may not have remembered that, but my common sense told me he was right. "I don't know what to tell you about how I would feel," I confessed. "I don't know." I had to admit that this Christina didn't seem that much different from me. The only thing that didn't make sense was why she would allow everyone to lead her around by the nose.

"Are you feeling up to this?" he asked. "I'm actually worried."

"About?"

"You. It's an untried ritual," he reminded me. "That's why Cormac is going to be here."

"I thought he was coming because he was going to cut his finger off," I murmured.

"He's assisting with the ritual."

"Does he know about this stuff?" From the look Jason gave me I had to believe he did. "It's the only alternative we have," I reminded him. "Would you rather not do it?"

He stepped closer and took my hands in his. "I want you to do what's going to make you comfortable," he said honestly. "If you want to do this, I would like you to do it to at least try to remember what we had."

I smiled wryly. "If you'd asked me two days ago what would make me comfortable, I'd have said that all of you going back to Salem would, but now I'm not so sure."

"I can give a rat's ass if you remember Brenda," he admitted, "and I think you could care less if you remember the others, but I would like you to remember something about who I am." He looked down at our hands for a moment and I realized he was staring at the ringless third finger of my left hand. "I don't want to be just another guy standing next to you."

Part of me wanted to pull out the wedding ring and put it on, but I'd sworn to myself that I wouldn't do that until I was sure that I loved this man enough to be his wife again. "This is something I want to do for my own benefit," I told him gently, "not because everyone is telling me I should do it. Not that everyone is telling me I should, but you know. If I end up a vegetable then—"

"I shoot Brenda," he said with a grim look. "It's going to be a long night."

I studied his face, not quite sure what I was looking for. "Here's what I'm afraid of," I confessed. "I start remembering shit and I feel really guilty for not trusting you guys to begin with."

"Don't feel guilty," he soothed, running his fingers lightly across the palms of my hands. "Things happen that we have no control over." He smiled teasingly. "You're the one who ran off without trusting us to go with you."

"Maybe I was trying to protect you," I suggested quietly.

He shook his head, exasperation evident in his movements. "If I've said this once, I've said it a thousand times. Maybe if you regain part of your memory, you'll remember that yes, you can take care of yourself, and yes, you're more stubborn than an embraced mule but one, safety in numbers." He raised a hand and started counting off his points with his fingers. "Two, never go in blind-sided, and three, always have a gun at your back."

I pulled the Glock from the small of my back with a smile. He let go of my other hand and grinned while pulling two guns from behind his back. Suppressing a grin of my own, I replaced the one gun and pulled the larger Glock and the Desert Eagle from my figure eight. He put his guns away and smiled while picking up my right foot and pulling up my pant leg to reveal the smaller gun at my ankle. Our laughter mingled and sounded almost joyful.

"I think I've got the weapons part covered," I assured him, replacing my weapons.

"I think so," he agreed, holding a hand out to me. "Shall we?"

"We shall." We had only taken a few steps toward the door when I stopped. "Wait."

He turned and looked down at me patiently. "What is it?"

"Can—" The words froze in my throat and I wasn't sure I could say what I wanted to, but somehow I forced the words out. "I know this sounds stupid, but w-will you kiss me?" I asked softly, trying not to beg. "Pretend it's me that you love and kiss me?"

He gently cupped the side of my face and smiled. "Honey, I do love you," he whispered.

Slowly he moved closer and as our lips touched I leaned into him until our bodies met. Nothing I'd felt before prepared me for what I felt now. It was as if our souls were reaching for each other, melding into one another. My arms went up around his neck and I stood on tiptoe to reach him better while he pulled me closer still. Time stood still and yet the kiss went on and on.

Finally he pulled away enough to rest his forehead on mine. I kept my eyes closed, searching for the strength to move away from him when I didn't feel I could stand on my own.

"Wow," I murmured. Words couldn't describe how I felt.

"Yeah." I could hear the sound of a smile in his voice.

Without opening my eyes I leaned up to kiss him again. Once more the world spun around us and the only thing I had to hold onto was him. A part of me wanted the kiss to go on forever, but deep down I knew we had other priorities to deal with tonight. I pulled back and looked up at him, unable to raise my eyes above his lips. "Maybe we should..."

"Go, I know," he finished.

I dragged my gaze up to his eyes. If we didn't go in now, I wasn't sure we would at all. "All right," I said softly as I stepped out of his arms.

He smiled and held his hand out to me. Hand in hand we left the peaceful moment we'd found to return inside. Unfortunately, the peace didn't last.

## *Ready or Not*

Strike a specter's bargain with a ritual brew  
Book and candle is natural to those pure and simple  
Spashdown - A Charming Spell

Jason and I joined Madelynne and Logan at a table near the center of the pub. It seemed we'd barely sat down when the door opened and in walked Cormac and company. Jason excused himself and went over to greet them.

"I guess the party's on," I muttered morosely. I wanted the Tremere to do the ritual, I just didn't want to turn myself over to their magic. "I think I'll go help Scott blow off steam," I added before excusing myself and joining him at the pool table.

Jason led his friends to an empty table and sat down with them while I grabbed a pool stick. I couldn't help keeping an eye on them while Scott and I played, but I couldn't really tell what they were talking about. I wasn't really sure I wanted to know, anyway.

Eventually I was able to settle into the game and put the upcoming ritual from my mind. It wasn't that I was soothed in any way shape or form, I just refused to think about it. Unfortunately, my moment of calm couldn't last.

"Tina!" Madelynne called across the pub.

I looked up to see that Brenda, James and Michael had arrived. They were carrying several coolers and the shopping bags that had been in the back of their rental car. "Fucking wonderful," I muttered darkly, turning to put the stick away. Scott echoed my movements and followed me over to where everyone was standing.

"Is Rafe okay?" I asked Brenda.

She avoided my eyes. "He'll be okay."

"How's Frasier doing?" Cormac questioned me.

"He's sleeping," I assured him, surprised he'd even asked. "Alex is keeping a close eye on him and Petor."

"We almost lost him," Jason added, concern evident in his voice.

I was a little taken aback at his concern, but downright shocked by the condition of Brenda's clothes. She hadn't changed since we'd left the Sabbat house and there was blood and dirt on her clothing. From what I could tell she didn't seem the type to go around with her clothes untidy.

"Where would you like this to take place?" she asked Madelynne. "We'll need a table."

"Upstairs." Turning, she led the way through the back room and up the stairway. Nearly all of the pack came with us, only Howard, Carissa and the ghouls remained behind.

I hesitated long enough to end up at the rear of the procession, and I watched as Brenda handed Jason a cooler. He thanked her then immediately opened it and began drinking from the blood bags inside. From the way he was feeding he must have been dangerously low on blood.

Once we got upstairs, Brenda and Cormac began setting up the ritual on the kitchen table. From what I could tell the preparations looked fairly Wiccan in nature. While they got ready, the pack sat down in the seating area of the room. Well, all of them but Scott. He chose to stand near the spot I'd found to lean against the wall and watch the Tremere with me.

When Cormac asked to see the ritual, I made my way over to them. Brenda didn't seem to like the idea of me looking over the parchment, but Cormac handed it to me without hesitation. While it looked fairly simple, it didn't make much sense to me. I was halfway through reading the document before I realized that it was written in Latin.

Once I'd read it over I looked up at Cormac. "Is this really gonna work?"

"Yes," he assured me.

I wasn't so confident, but then again he was the magic expert. "Looks Greek to me," I muttered as I handed him back the parchment.

"Too bad she couldn't lose her sense of humor," he murmured dryly. To Brenda he said, "Would you prefer me to do the ritual with you assisting or would you like to perform it with me assisting?"

She shrugged. "It doesn't matter. Why don't you just do it?"

"I know Latin," I told Scott as I rejoined him against the wall.

"You're the one that taught me," Jason put in. I knew he was trying to be comforting, and in a way it helped. Of course, in another way it made it that much worse. "Are you okay?" he asked as he finished off the last of the blood bags.

"Do you want to sit and have the ritual done on you?" I asked irritably.

"I was eaten by a Nos," he reminded me. "It can't be that bad."

I held my hand out toward the table where Cormac was working. "Then go ahead."

"I have my memory," he replied with a smile.

Cormac took the Ginkgo Biloba extract and placed it in a mortar where he ground it while chanting in Latin. Once he had it finely ground, he continued chanting and sprinkled a palm full of it into a chalice.

Brenda brought over a small jar of blood as he picked up an oak stick and stirred the mixture he'd been working on. Jason and Michael joined them and they began severing fingers, then added one from the jar. I forced myself to watch the grisly workings. If they could donate body parts, the least I could do was watch.

Cormac lit a sterno can and looked over at me. "Tina, we need your blood," he said softly.

"Why am I not comforted by that statement," I mumbled as I reluctantly walked over to the table.

"Just a pint," he assured me as he handed me the ritual knife.

"Yeah." Without any further hesitation I ran it across my wrist. Immediately blood welled to the surface and began falling into the wooden bowl. It didn't feel any better the second time around to be donating blood for a Tremere ritual.

When Cormac nodded that it was enough, I brought the wound to my mouth and licked it closed as I walked back to stand against the wall. The sound of chanting filled the air once more while he picked up a second mortar and pestle and began grinding a small piece of ivory into powder. Then he sprinkled two pinches of the ivory into the blood filled bowl and poured the entire mixture into the cauldron. He placed the fire beneath the cauldron and we all waited for the concoction to boil.

The smell of blood permeated the room, making hunger burn strong inside of me, demanding to be satiated. Between that and the fear shooting through me it took all I had not to run screaming

from the room. I wasn't sure if I was ready for this, but I couldn't back out now. I forced myself to watch as Cormac dropped the fingertips into the cauldron then removed it from the flame.

He looked over at me again. "We need you back here."

"Okay." I pushed away from the wall and went to stand in front of him. As soon as I was in place, Jason, Brenda and Michael closed ranks around me, standing in a circle with me in the center.

Cormac picked up the chalice and dipped the first two fingers of his right hand into it. Carefully he drew a rune onto my forehead. Although I tried to leave myself open to his magic, I didn't fall into the trance I was supposed to at this point in the ritual.

He frowned and dipped his fingers once more into the chalice before redrawing the rune on my forehead. Again, nothing happened.

"It's not working," I said in a small voice, not sure what exactly was going wrong or if I was doing something to block the ritual.

He exchanged meaningful looks with his unnamed friend for a long moment, then turned back to me and reached for my neck. I leaned away from him and raised a protective hand over my chest.

"One of your necklaces is blocking the ritual," he said softly.

"Which one is it?" Jason asked.

I looked down at the tangle of chains and pendants I was wearing. "Any idea?"

"You wouldn't know it if I told you," he said logically. "The triangle."

After a moment's work disentangling the chain, I held it up. "This one?"

"Yes."

"It's blocking the ritual?" I asked in surprise, the wheels turning in my mind. If it had some kind of magical properties, then Chaos had probably given it to me. Had he been protecting me from magic such as what they were trying to perform here? Or had he been trying to ensure that I wouldn't remember everything the Salem people claimed to be true about him?

Regardless of where I had gotten the necklace and what its purpose was, if I wanted this ritual to succeed I had no choice but to take it off. Slowly I separated it from the other necklaces I wore and lifted it over my head. I glanced at Madelynne, then at Scott who was standing nearby looking very intimidating. He came forward to take it, then stepped back and loomed within striking distance of Cormac.

Once again the warlock began chanting. He dipped his fingers into the chalice, and raised his hand to my forehead. The instant he touched me, I was fell into unconsciousness.

I waited in the silence of my mind, alone but for the smell of blood that had followed me down. I drifted in the silent void that was my memory, waiting. It felt like no time at all had passed when I felt a light touch on my forehead. At first I thought it was my imagination, then I heard Cormac's voice echoing in the depths of my mind.

"Awake and remember!" he called forcefully.

My eyes popped open and I looked up at him, a little surprised by the fact that I didn't feel any different. There was a sticky substance on my forehead of course, but my mind was still a blank slate and the only memories I had were the ones I'd made since Madelynne had found me.

"It didn't work," I repeated, more than a little disappointed that I still couldn't remember these people.

"It takes a day for the results," he reminded me.

I didn't feel any different than I had a few minutes ago, other than the fact that I was relieved the ritual was over. I eased my way out of the circle and joining Scott I raised a hand toward my forehead, but stopped short of touching the rune. "Can I wash this off?" I asked of no one in particular.

"No," Cormac said firmly. "It's best to leave it on until you start regaining memories."

Scott lifted his hand to put the necklace around my neck, but Brenda's voice made him pause.

"And leave the necklace off," she advised.

Before I could protest Scott continued the movement he'd begun and the deed was done.

"It's already back on," I said apologetically to Brenda.

"The necklace was only blocking active magic," Mac's unnamed friend told us. "It's already been completed."

I laid a hand over the pendant, wondering once again if Chaos had given it to me for my protection or his. I hoped the ritual would bring me memories that would help me decide who I could trust. Of course, if it didn't I was no worse off than I'd been before.

## *Misery Loves Company*

That I would be loved

Even when I'm not myself

Alanis Morissette - That I Would Be Good

"Everything okay?" Madelynn asked as she joined Scott and I.

"I have blood on my forehead," I murmured dryly, not sure what else to tell her. I honestly didn't feel any different, or remember anything of my past.

She grinned. "Yes, I noticed."

"It tingles."

"If it tingles," Cormac said from where he was helping Brenda clean up, "that means it's working."

"Is this supposed to come on all at once after twenty-four hours?" I asked him.

"No, the memories should return gradually," he told me.

"You know the ritual that well?"

He gave me a meaningful look. "I am familiar with memory."

I'd forgotten that he too had lost his memory upon his embrace. I glanced at the clock to see that it was one thirty. Twenty-four hours didn't seem like a whole lot of time, but right at that moment it felt like an eternity.

"Are you okay?" Jason asked, joining us.

"Yeah," I admitted. "He didn't turn me into a frog or take my free will, that I'm aware of, so yeah. I keep expecting to be this little and start ribbiting."

"I'll have to find a place to stay for the evening," he murmured.

"Is there a hotel nearby?" I asked Madelynn.

"Not really."

"I've got an extra spot," Emily offered from the couch.

I stared at her in surprise, not sure how I felt about Jason spending the day with her.

"She is harmless," Madelynn reminded me.

"But is he?" I demanded softly.

"I don't know," she admitted.

"I can take care of myself," Emily insisted.

I could feel the weight of Jason's eyes on me, but I was looking at Emily with a warning in my eyes. I wasn't sure if I should feel jealous of my pack mate or not. I knew she was harmless, that she flirted with anything male, but I didn't like the thought of her flirting with Jason.

"Would it be okay if I used one of the couches for the day?" Jason asked Madelynn.

"No," she replied firmly.

"If it's an inconvenience than I'll find somewhere else and return tomorrow night," he murmured.

"Its not," she said, softening a bit. "I just feel that you need to earn our trust more fully."

"I understand," he assured her.

"If you put yourself in my shoes, would you allow it?" she asked.

He smiled wryly. "Probably not."

I excused myself to let them work out where Jason would or wouldn't be staying. Brenda was sprinkling something in the corner of the room, and I reached her side as she straightened. I wanted to say something, but I just wasn't sure what.

"Did you have any other questions?" she asked without looking at me.

"I appreciate the effort that you've made here," I said awkwardly, gesturing toward her bandaged left hand. "I know that you really wanted to stay with your husband, and I appreciate your coming here."

She nodded dismissively. "May you find all the answers to the questions that you may have." Her voice told me she didn't mean what she said. It was almost as if she were blaming me for something, most likely her husband's injuries.

"Thank you," I repeated awkwardly as she moved off.

I went to Cormac and tried to thank him for performing the ritual, but I got an even colder reply for my efforts. Not really understanding why I suddenly felt the need to cry, I went over to the couch and sat down near Logan.

Apparently with my new independent attitude and Gangrel friends, I wasn't good enough for Christina's Tremere family any more. Bitterly I wondered why they had even bothered to perform the ritual if they cared so little for the woman I had been.

The Tremere and Michael didn't stick around very much longer, thankfully. They each coolly expressed the hope that the ritual would be successful, and said their goodbyes. Not surprisingly Jason stayed long enough to see Frasier.

I took him upstairs to where the boys were still sleeping. In the soft light from the hallway we could see the bruises, bite marks, and dark circles under their eyes. It made me want to go back and kill the Sabbath all over again.

"How's ah, what's his name?" Jason asked softly.

"Petor," I supplied, trying not to be too irritated at his selective memory. "He and Frasier had about the same injuries, but he didn't get as much blood as Frasier did. Hopefully they'll both be fine in a few days."

We stood there for a little while, watching the boys sleep. I might have stayed there a long time listening to the even sound of their breathing, but eventually Jason touched my arm and gestured toward the door.

"I think I'm going to go," he said when we started downstairs. "I've got to find some place to stay and I think you need some time alone."

"I'm sorry you can't stay here," I told him, "but I understand Madelynne's point."

"As do I," he replied. "I'll be back as soon as I can tomorrow night." After saying his goodbyes to Madelynne and Logan, he left.

When he'd gone I felt a little out of it. Madelynne gave me more blood to drink, but it didn't fill the empty hole inside of me. I was still hungry, but blood wasn't what I needed. I tried sitting around

for a while but waiting for my memory to return seemed like such a useless thing to do. Eventually I made my way downstairs to take out my frustrations on the dartboard.

I hadn't been at it very long when Scott joined me. I was better at darts than I thought I'd be, but not as good as he was. After a half hour I realized that throwing darts wasn't going to ease my restlessness.

"This isn't helping," I growled as I aimed for the board. "Why couldn't those bastards have just left me the fuck alone?"

A second after I let the dart fly I felt a hand on the skin at the side of my waist lightly pushing up the fabric of my shirt. "There are other ways to relieve stress," Scott whispered near my ear as he moved close enough for me to feel his body a hair's breath from my back.

I closed my eyes and leaned back enough to let our bodies connect lightly. Scott's touch made me feel safe, made me feel like nothing that had happened tonight would change me. A part of me knew that I should walk away, that I should go back and sit with the boys until dawn, but a bigger part of me rebelled.

Turning in his arms I looked up into his dark eyes. "I don't know if I'll still be me tomorrow," I warned him. "I can't make any guarantees."

He glanced toward the rune on my forehead then smiled reassuringly down into my eyes. "I'm not asking for any," he told me softly.

I closed my eyes in relief at the acceptance in his statement. If things went badly, tomorrow would bring the return of the Tremere robot Brenda and the others seemed to miss so badly. By this time tomorrow I would most likely have memories that would change who I was in some fundamental way that none of us could foresee.

I knew that if I turned down his offer he wouldn't think any less of me. We would turn back to the dartboard and continue with the more conventional stress relief I'd chosen earlier. Our friendship wouldn't be compromised, nor would the trust we had in one another. Deep down I knew that Scott would never insist I do anything against my will. He accepted me in a way that no one else did, not even Madelynn, or my boys.

Tonight might be the last chance I had to make my own decisions, to follow my own path. Pushing the knowledge that tomorrow I might regret what I was about to do, I put my arms around Scott's neck and leaned up to touch his lips with mine. His arms pulled me closer and lifted me off my feet.

The kiss wasn't like the one I'd shared with Jason, it less a meeting of souls and more a meeting of the minds. I knew that Scott didn't expect me to be anyone but myself, and that freed me to relax in his embrace. Not surprisingly I was able to push thoughts of tomorrow and my memory out of my mind. When he sat me down on my feet again I laid my head on his shoulder.

"Upstairs?" he asked softly.

"Upstairs," I agreed, reluctantly moving away from his strength. Instantly all of my doubts returned. What if the Salem crew was right about my feelings for Jason? Would I hate myself in the morning if I chose to do this tonight?

The tingling of the rune on my forehead reminded me of the future. Tomorrow might bring guilt and heartache, but if here and now was the only time Scott and I would ever have to be together I intended to make the most of it.

Pushing my doubts aside, I turned and led the way upstairs. Madelynne and Logan were sitting in the living area watching television, but they barely glanced up as we passed through on our way to the third floor. Scott stood in the doorway while I checked to make sure the boys were all right, then followed me into my bedroom and closed the door.

They say making love is like riding a bike; you never really forget how. I suppose that theory is correct because everything seemed to progress naturally. Scott was gentle when I needed him to be, but rough where it felt good. Near dawn I fell asleep in the safe circle of his arms.

## Significant Others

I remember when I would tear myself in two  
Over how to be, what to say & what to do  
Concrete Blonde - When I Was a Fool

When the sun went down I woke slowly, letting my mind drift through the blur of awareness that is the place between sleep and awake. Fractured scenes played across my memory, faces and places so muddled that at first I didn't realize what they were. Each one lasted a minute or less, and after each memory returned to me darkness claimed my soul.

*"Antonio?"*

*I was lying on a bed with the covers pulled up to my chin, and my side was sore. He was standing by the fireplace looking down at the flames but when I called his name he turned 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 else.*

*"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."*

Darkness.

*I was looking up at Cormac. "Was there anything else?" I asked, hating the vulnerability I heard in my voice.*

*"Not for you," he told me not unkindly.*

*I tried not to be hurt by that, but I couldn't help how I felt. The Tremere who had embraced me hadn't thought enough to leave even a short note for me, but he'd left volumes for Cormac. Jealousy and resentment burned through me so strongly that I had to fight to push them aside.*

Darkness.

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

*I suppressed a grin and remembered how much fun we used to have together. "I've missed you," I whispered affectionately.*

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

*His words confused me. Why did he have to turn aside every serious thing I said to him?*

Darkness.

*"My dear, I would think you would have better taste in friends than that," Michael drawled scornfully from the armchair he was sprawled upon. "If you really must have a man on your arm, you know I would be more than happy to find you someone more appropriate, or escort you myself."*

*"I appreciate the concern, Michael," I said dryly, "But I'm a big girl. I think I can find my own... escorts."*

Darkness.

*"Jason!" I cried out, desperate to keep him from leaving.*

*He turned to look at me, and his eyes glowed briefly in the dark night. He waited, not speaking.*

*"I love you," I whispered, crying, hoping against hope that I could reach some part of him that hadn't been changed by his embrace. My heart shattered and I collapsed to the sidewalk at his cold reply.*

*"You'll get over it," he bit out before turning and walking away.*

Darkness.

*Brenda and I sat on the bed in an uncomfortable silence, and unconsciously my fingers found a seam on the box in my lap and ran along the edge. She put her arm around my waist and gratefully I laid my head on her shoulder.*

*She started humming, and it took me a minute to realize what the tune was. I laughed, happy to be with someone who loved me and understood what I needed. "I take it you stocked up on shampoo?"*

*"Lots of shampoo," she told me, rubbing her hand fingers across my scalp in a scrubbing motion.*

Darkness.

*I looked up at Antonio expectantly, not sure what I wanted him to say. 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 slowly. I understood.*

*I returned his nod and looked down, struggling for control. He pulled me into his arms and held me while my tears fell unchecked. I wasn't sure why I was crying, relief I supposed, that the truth was finally out.*

Darkness.

*"Would you mind looking at this?" Cormac asked, placing a book in my lap.*

*"Not at all." I looked down 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 to reveal a dark compartment beneath.*

Darkness.

*Michael and I stood together near an elevator, his hands affectionately on my shoulders.*

*"I think I have far too many men worrying for my safety," I said with a sad smile. "I'm learning to take care of myself." I allowed my smile to widen until the points of my elongated fangs showed.*

*He laughed as we turned and walked out the door.*

Darkness.

*I met Jason in the middle of the street. "What's going on?" he asked.*

*"It's a puppy dog reunion," I told him dryly. "I figured that I'd be better off on that side of the road, since the last time I was at a puppy reunion I did not have a good time."*

*Jason looked at something behind me. "I too don't like the idea of becoming kibble."*

*"Or bits," I agreed with a smile, "so I'm headed back to the carriage."*

*"I'll go with you," he said, offering me his hand.*

Darkness.

*"She is of no consequence to me," Antonio stated, his Spanish accent strong as he stood there glaring at me from the other side of the bars.*

*"Antonio!" I cried, stricken. I had trusted so completely that he would save me that I couldn't believe he was abandoning me to this horrible fate.*

*"Sit down and be silent, childe," he barked in a tone that would brook no disobedience.*

*I walked reluctantly over to the cot and sat, blood tears filling my eyes and spilling down my cheeks. Hunger burned strongly inside of me and I knew I couldn't go another night without feeding.*

Darkness.

*Fire exploded in my side and I was thrown back into the corner, squeezing off a shot of my own as I fell. I could see Brenda on the other side of the room, still firing her gun toward me. Another round hit 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 it would take more vitae than I had in me and days of rest to heal the wound in my side. The most I could hope for was to stop the bleeding until I could get to some sort of blood supply and a safe place to hold up.*

Darkness.

*Cormac and I were sitting together in a well appointed living room.*

*"You know," he said without looking up from the letter he was reading, "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. My entire life had been about forgetting.*

Darkness.

*The power flickered and the elevator ground to a stop. Michael put a protective hand on my shoulder to push me behind him and into the corner. I could feel more than hear him pull his gun as I put a hand inside my purse on the Glock hidden there.*

Darkness.

*Brenda grabbed my hand and pulled me further along the side of the building. "What's going on?" she demanded, her voice low and angry.*

*"What are you so upset about?" I asked in confusion, a little hurt by her abruptness.*

*"A month ago you were so wrapped up in 'Martín' you couldn't see anyone else," she bit out. "Three weeks ago you were so upset over his disappearance you were dashing around the globe trying to find him. Tonight you're on that Gangrel like a fish in water. What's up?"*

*A deadness swept through me that left only anger behind. I pulled my hand away, wondering if she would ever trust me to make the right decisions.*

Darkness.

*I went to Antonio's side. "Are you all right?"*

*He smiled. "Yes, my childe. Nice move, you have learned much since I've been away," he added, gesturing toward the headless body on the floor.*

*I returned the smile, for a moment forgetting my worries. It was good to be with Antonio again. "You said to watch your back."*

Darkness.

*I was standing in a sitting room looking up at Cormac and feeling happy that he was back. There was so much I wanted to talk to him about, things no one else would understand. "I wanted to be here when you came, but I know that you have business to talk about," I said softly.*

*"Of course," he replied. He laid a hand on my shoulder for a moment and I smiled at him, sure that this was as close to a hug as he ever got.*

Darkness.

*Jason's light brown hair framed his strong face, and his green eyes gazed down into my soul. I'd seen him in a tux before, but he'd never looked so handsome. He took my hand, pulling me to my feet beside him. "I now understand my place in this world. It is to stand by your side and love you better than anyone else can. Christina Joan Kline, I love you with all my heart, with all my soul, with all my being."*

*Those simple words made me cry in earnest as he kissed me gently. He pulled me into his arms and I held onto him, more grateful to God in that moment than I had ever been in my life. I was finally with the man I loved more than anything in the world, and nothing could ever tear us apart again.*

Darkness.

*Michael looked like hell. His shirt was ripped and stained with blood. He was leaning heavily on the counter and through the gaps in his clothing I could see claw marks down his side. He needed blood and he needed it now.*

*I stepped forward and offered him my wrist. He took it without hesitation and I shivered as his teeth penetrated my flesh. For a moment I was caught in the 'kiss,' then I felt his teeth withdraw and his tongue drag against my skin, sealing the wound.*

Darkness.

*Brenda pulled a small jeweler's box from an overnight bag and handed it to me. I opened it and gaped down at the rose shaped pin inside, fashioned from diamonds, rubies and emeralds "Oh, gosh. This is beautiful, where did you get it?"*

Darkness closed in on me so black and so complete that I felt as if I were drowning in it. I gasped for air I didn't need and sat bolt upright in the bed. At first I didn't remember where I was, then it hit me. Detroit, I was in Detroit. I latched onto that one thought and struggled to drive away the memories that last night I'd wanted so badly to return.

# *Fragile*

For the change she's facing now  
And the storm that's raging  
Collective Soul - She Gathers Rain

Scott sat up beside me and laid a gentle hand on my back as I let my head fall into my hands. I felt the flakes of dried blood on my forehead and wanted to gag.

"Are you okay?" he asked softly, caressing my bare skin comfortingly.

Slowly I turned to look at him, not sure what to say. I'd known last night that it might come to this, to having memories that I didn't know how to deal with. Confusion reined supreme and I laid my head against his shoulder to drive it away.

"Bad dreams?"

"Memories," I whispered.

His hand froze on my back. "Good or bad?"

"Yeah." I sat up again but couldn't meet his eye. "I've got to check on the boys."

I could feel his eyes follow me as I quickly pulled on the clothes I'd worn last night and hurried from the room. The boys were awake, but thankfully groggy enough from the sedatives Alex had given them that they didn't realize what state my mind I was in. They looked a lot better than they had last night, and I didn't stay with them long. I wanted to shower, but Scott had beaten me to it so I retreated to my room.

Sitting on the edge of the bed I let the memories I'd gotten back run through my mind. I didn't understand how I could feel such conflicting emotions toward everyone I'd known. From love to hate, the entire gamut was there lingering in my memory. Everything seemed such a blur I wasn't sure how I'd ever get it straight in my head.

Someone knocked on the door and since I hadn't closed it all the way it opened a little. Startled, I glanced up to find Madelynn looking in on me.

"Are you okay?" she asked softly.

"Yeah." I wasn't sure if I really was, but it sounded good. "Yeah, come on in."

She stepped inside the room and glanced around while I stood and ran my hands nervously down my thighs, not sure what to say.

"Did you remember something?" she asked, concerned.

"Yeah." I looked away, not sure what to tell her about first, or if I should even tell her anything. "Yeah, quite a few some things, but not a lot of them make sense."

"Good or bad?" she asked.

"Yeah." I smiled sadly. "Good things, bad things, it-it doesn't make sense. I don't know."

When she her eyes lingered on the bed, I followed her gaze and was instantly chagrined. From the state of the bedclothes it was quite obvious that I hadn't spent the day alone. Quickly I grabbed a corner of the covers and tossed them over the tangled sheet before sitting down on them.

As I gestured for Madelynn to sit down with me, I wondered if I was supposed to feel guilty for having sex with Scott. Not that it had been a commitment of any kind, but I was married. I remembered being married now, I just didn't know how I felt about it.

"So, busy night?" Madelynn teased as she sat down beside me.

I nodded and tried not to wince. "Yeah, kinda," I admitted hesitantly. I wasn't sure if she'd approve of Scott and I furthering our relationship, but when I peeked up at her, she didn't actually seem to care. From what I could tell she wasn't even surprised.

"Obviously the ritual worked because you seem a bit out of it," she murmured.

"Yeah, I woke up and they were there," I told her. "Weird. It's hard to describe. There's just-it's so confusing." My head was still spinning.

"Do you believe it to be all real?" she asked seriously.

I thought about that for a moment before answering. "I think so. It all matches most of what they were telling me, and they all feel like memories," I said truthfully. "It's just there's-okay, I remember Michael telling me that I needed to pick better friends, but on the other hand I remember him being injured and in desperate need of blood and without hesitation I fed him. Thing like that, complete opposites, but then I remember just talking to him a couple of times, nothing either really good or really bad."

"Just normal everyday conversation?"

"Yeah, if normal everyday conversation involves the power going out in an elevator and him pushing me behind him so that I don't get attacked," I drawled. "If that's normal everyday for me then it explains why I wear the weapons."

She smiled. "Yeah, maybe."

"I remember telling him that I had far too many men looking after my safety and I could take care of myself." Actually it seemed like I'd been saying that a lot in my past. "There could be a theme for that in those memories, because I remember Brenda and I arguing over some guy named Martín and a Gangrel. Maybe Martín was a Gangrel."

"You have this thing with Gangrel?" she asked, trying not to smile.

"Apparently," I grinned, "because I was on the Gangrel like a fish in water. And I was very angry that she didn't trust my judgment. But then I remember sitting together with her talking about how we were going to wash the man out of my hair. It was all very light hearted and happy."

"Obviously this man isn't Jason," she commented.

"I don't know," I admitted. "It could have been Martín, but he and the Gangrel, it seemed like they were two different people."

"There was another Gangrel in your life before Jason," she reminded me.

"Luke," I remembered. "Maybe there's this theme with me and Gangrel men."

"The animal instinct in them?" she suggested.

That comment made me remember what Scott had been like and I had to laugh. "Not that I remember."

"I don't know how I could help shed any light on this," she told me.

"It's just—I don't know how I'm supposed to behave toward these people now," I said softly.

"They're leaving soon," she reminded me.

"I'm sure Jason is going to be here soon, if he's not downstairs all ready," I murmured. "And can I just say that he left me? I told him I loved him and he told me to get over it." Even thinking about that night made me angry.

"Kinda goes with how he was acting when he first got here," she replied.

"Then I remember him saying that his place in this world was to love me better than anybody else could," I admitted. That was something I could remember with fondness.

"Very contradictory," she agreed. "I can understand why you'd be confused."

"And I was very jealous of Cormac for some reason, and I think it had to do with our sire," I continued. "I was very jealous. On the other hand, there was a time when I was very glad to see him, glad that he was home because I could talk to him about stuff that I couldn't talk to anybody else about. What is up with that? Which one came first?"

"I don't know," she replied soothingly. "The only way I think you will ever find out is by talking to these people. Is that something that you really think you're ready to do? Discuss all these memories with them?"

"I don't know," I told her. "If I don't talk to them about it, am I going to remember more? Maybe this is all I'm going to get, and how do I deal with what this is without finding out more? But then how can I trust them to tell me the truth?" I ran a hand through my hair and tried to put my tangled thoughts into some kind of order. "It's worse than it was last night. Other than the fact the boys are here and safe," I added quickly. "But it's worse than it was before the ritual, I just don't know..."

"Maybe you just need to give it time," she said logically. "Take what you've got and deal with it at face value. You don't know which memories came first, how they happened, or any of the circumstances surrounding what little bit of a memory you got back."

I could see her point, there was no use stressing about things I couldn't remember. "Right."

"Take what you've got and see what happens when they get here," she added.

"See what happen when they get here," I repeated, looking at the rumpled blankets. "Maybe there are a few things I shouldn't talk to them about."

"Some things are better left unsaid," she agreed with a smile. "I think that would cause more problems than anything."

"Yeah, I don't think Jason would react well," I murmured, remembering his jealousy. "I don't think Brenda would either, I wasn't being the little Tremere clone."

"You're a big girl and you can do what you want," she said firmly.

"I think that's what they have the biggest problem with," I replied dryly.

"You doing what you want?" When I nodded, she asked, "Don't they have their own puppies they can control?"

"You would think so," I drawled.

"It seems odd now that I think about it that they were so down on you about other Gangrel that you were with," she began.

"But Jason's okay," I finished. "So what's up with that? Is he this token Gangrel that the clan supplied me with so I would be happy with him and not be going after the one that I really wanted, maybe this Luke that Brenda doesn't like?"

"I don't know. He seems different," she told me. "Not that everyone comes from the same mold."

"He doesn't really seem that... Gangrel," I admitted. "But he is cute."

"Well, if that's all he's got going for him..." she murmured.

"He seems nice enough," I reminded her. "He was nice last night, he didn't throw a fit when you told him he couldn't stay. That was a plus. I really expected more of an argument than we got out of him."

"Still, he has points against him for all he said and did previous to last night," she said sternly. "You can't make up for a weeks worth of bad actions in one day."

I had to agree with her. "I don't understand why they think that I should trust them when they just keep giving me reasons not to."

"Maybe you should just try not to think about it for a while," she suggested.

"Worked well last night," I said with a soft laugh. I'd spent a long time not thinking about anything related to Salem.

"You didn't have the memories last night," she reminded me.

"True." I looked down at my hands. "Now I don't know whether to feel guilty or not. I'm thinking not."

"It's just a couple of memories," she said gently. "Like you said, you don't know which ones came first. Let it go for now. You can't take back what you did."

"Wouldn't want to," I replied with a shrug. I couldn't regret what I'd done with Scott. I'd needed something that he'd been more than willing to give me. How could I regret the comfort and understanding we'd shared?

"Wait and see what happens when you talk to them about your memories," she suggested.

"They might not even show up, you never know." Of course I knew I wouldn't be that lucky. My past was something I had to deal with now, tonight. "I guess I need to take a shower, I'll bet Jason's downstairs already."

"He'll wait, I'm sure," she said dryly. She shot a quick glance down at my clothing. "It's probably better if you change, if you're wearing what you wore yesterday, he might be suspicious."

"I was in a hurry to check the boys when I woke up," I said absently.

"I'm sure you were," she drawled as she stood up.

Her words reminded me of something else. "I guess I need to talk to Scott before I go downstairs too," I said softly.

She came over to lay a comforting hand on my shoulder, then headed downstairs to do some paperwork. I gathered a change of clothes and went to wait just outside the bathroom door for Scott to exit.

He came out a few minutes later with his shirt draped over his shoulder and a towel on his head. For a moment I stared at his bare chest and thought about what it had been like to touch it last night. He'd been there for me when I needed it, accepted me as fucked up as I was with no

constraints or hesitation. There was no way I was going to let a partial memory of another man make me feel guilty for what Scott and I had shared.

“I just wanted—” Hell, no matter what I said it was going to come out wrong. “I mean—”

At my stuttering hesitation, he laughed softly, then stepped forward and laid a gentle kiss on my forehead before walking away. Somehow he had understood even when I didn't. With a smile on my face I went into the bathroom and closed the door.

I took my time in the shower trying to postpone the moment I'd have to deal with Jason and the memories of my past. I hoped that the hot water would clear my head, help give me some perspective to what I remembered of the past, but it didn't work out that way. When I finally turned off the water I was no more clear about anything than I had been when I'd started. I spent a few extra minutes to dry my hair and put a little make up on before finally gathering my courage and heading downstairs.

# Wrestling Demons

Never felt so undecided

Everything I've ever had has been taken away

Drowning Pool - Reminded

With serious doubts about what I was doing, I walked into the pub alone. I wasn't surprised to find Jason already there, sitting at the bar with a drink in front of him. He'd been watching for me, and before the door closed behind me he was on his feet.

It was almost like a scene in a movie, the one where the boy and girl meet in the middle of a crowded room and embrace. The only difference was that there was no embracing for us. Remembering Jason had made me even more confused about what I felt for him.

"You okay?" he asked softly.

"Yeah," I whispered.

"So are you still you? Or are you with full memories of who you were?"

I still felt like me, but I wasn't sure if that was because I hadn't remembered enough to change me, or because losing my memory hadn't changed me the way I'd thought it had. "I remembered some things when I woke up tonight," I said slowly.

"Hopefully some good things," he prompted.

In my mind's eye I could see him walking away from me on that dark street as if it had been last night. "If you count you walking away from me good things."

He nodded sadly. "That would have been San Francisco."

"I don't remember where it was." I looked up into his hazel eyes and was lost for a moment in the past. "There were other things," I admitted softly.

"Do you want to go somewhere and talk?" he offered.

I really wasn't sure I was ready to be alone with him. My emotions weren't very stable, and I didn't want to do or say something I'd regret once I thought about it. "There's an empty booth over there," I suggested.

He stepped back and gestured toward the booth, waiting for me to pass before following me over to it. We sat opposite each other and the silence stretched between us for a long moment.

"You look extremely more nervous than normal," he said with a smile.

"I wouldn't say that I'm more nervous," I denied. "There's just a lot of things to..."

"Take in at once," he finished for me.

"Yeah, a lot of contradictory memories," I agreed. "I don't remember that much of it. I remember something about kibble and bits and a puppy dog reunion? It was kind of confusing because it was light out."

"You remember Stephen then?"

I frowned. "No, all I remember is you."

"Stephen is the werewolf that we hung out with," he explained.

I stared at him in surprise. "We hung out with a werewolf?"

"I wouldn't call it we," he said softly. "It was more that you hung out with a werewolf."

Somehow I couldn't picture it, but since I didn't remember I'd have to take his word for it. I smiled at the next thing I remembered. "Then there was something about dinner and—" I moved my hand the way I remembered I'd done, like I was checking my nails, but really I was baring my wrist.

He smiled too. "Do you remember anything about home?"

"No," I admitted, "but I remember you in a tux."

"At the wedding?" he grinned. "Do you remember me asking you?"

"No." I wished that I did remember his proposal, it might have given me a better idea of why I'd married him. "No, but I remember you in a tux, and you were doing a toast, and you made me cry."

"Do you want me to tell you what I was saying?" he asked softly. There was warmth in his eyes that made me want to fall into his arms.

"No," I whispered. If he repeated how much he lived to love me, I knew I'd start crying right then and there. A little louder, I said, "I remember what you were saying, or part of it anyway."

"I could tell you," he offered, "that way you would know if I'm being on the level or not."

"No, thank you." A part of me wanted him to declare his undying devotion, but I still felt too fragile, like the wrong word, or even the right one, would make me fall apart. I wished I remembered more of my past, or less of it. Either would have made this easier to deal with.

He reached across the table and took my hands in his. His skin was soft, familiar for the first time. I closed my eyes for a moment, searching my mind for something that would tell me I still loved him.

"I'm glad you remember me now," he told me gently. "At least now you know I wasn't lying about us being together."

I opened my eyes and looked into his handsome face. "But we were also apart," I reminded him.

"At times," he admitted. "But it was my fault for not trusting you. I was more than grateful that you waited for me to get my head out of my ass." He looked down at my hand for a moment, then back up into my eyes. "No matter what you remember from the past I hope that we can start over now. I want to be with you, Christina. My heart belongs to you, you're the only thing that keeps it beating."

Tears filled my eyes and I had a hard time blinking them away. He said he loved me, but was it me or his Christina he lived for? "I-I only have those few memories," I said, trying to rein in my tears. "I only remember very specific incidences, and I don't know how I feel about them."

"You probably remember the most traumatic," he murmured.

"I don't know why talking about dog food is traumatic," I answered, "but whatever."

"Being zapped into another dimension and stuck in the middle of two werewolves is traumatic," he assured me with a smile. "Us being together for the first time in two years was traumatic. At that time I think I was still Nosferatu."

Alternate dimensions and clan jumping were two topics I wasn't sure I was ready to handle. Honestly I didn't think I could handle the stuff I already knew, let alone something as confusing as reality shifts and acts of God.

"I just-I guess I need a little more time to figure out where my head is," I told him.

"That is understandable." I could tell he didn't like it, but at least he was accepting it. "Memories come back slowly and you need time. I hope that you will let me be part of that so I can help you with the past and what you need to work toward in the future."

"We need to just take it slow," I warned him. "I need time."

"So what do you remember about Brenda?"

I shrugged. "I remember her shooting me."

"It was an accident," he reminded me. "She didn't touch a gun for a long time after that."

"I don't remember that part," I said softly. "I just remember looking across the room and seeing her firing at me. Who's Martín?"

"Martín DePorres," he supplied. "That was me."

Brenda had said something about him having a multitude of alias', so I let the comment pass. "I remember arguing with Brenda about Martín and a Gangrel and fish."

I told him about the rose, but he didn't seem to know what I was talking about. "Apparently Brenda was going to help me 'wash that man' right out of my hair," I said with a sad smile, remembering the love I'd felt for her in that moment.

"Luke?" he asked, his voice suddenly tense.

"I don't know," I said honestly.

"Do you remember anybody else?"

"I remember Antonio and Michael and Cormac," I told him.

"So what do you think of Mac now?" he asked. It was almost as if he expected me to completely reverse my opinion of the man.

"I-I don't know what t-to think," I stammered. "I remember at one point being very happy to see him and at another very jealous and resentful. I don't know."

"Do you remember anybody named Talon?" he asked carefully, an uneasy look on his face.

"No." At his sigh of relief, I added, "Would that be the Graves you were talking about the other night?"

"Yes."

"I'm only remembering things specific to the people who contributed to the ritual," I told him honestly. "I don't remember anyone else."

He looked down at my hands for a long moment as if he would find all the answers he was looking for in the lines of my skin. When he finally looked up I swear I saw fear in his eyes.

"How do you want to start?" he asked gently.

What could I say? Suggesting that we date sounded wrong somehow. I was married to this man, but I didn't really *feel* married to him. I knew I cared about him, that a part of me longed to agree to anything he wanted, but I wasn't sure I loved him. How could I go back to the relationship we'd once had when I didn't really remember it?

"I don't know, Jason," I admitted sadly. "Like I said, I need some time to figure out where my head is. I don't know if I'm going to get more memories and what they're going to be like. I mean,

you can tell me they're all going to be good and happy and positive all you want but that doesn't mean they're going to be."

"I'm not going to tell you that," he countered honestly, "they're not going to be. You'll probably be asking yourself why the hell you were doing those things."

"I'm already there," I told him bluntly. "The good and the bad and the blur in between, it's just—it's very confusing."

"I don't want you to do anything that you're not comfortable with," he told me. "I don't want to flood you and have you withdraw from me."

My smile took a wry turn. "I'm feeling pretty overwhelmed already. There's a lot—" My voice broke and it took me a minute before I could go on. "I just don't know where I stand and I need some time to figure it out, and I need you to give that to me." There was a pleading note to my words that I couldn't avoid.

"Well, you gave me two years," he told me with a sad smile. "I can give you whatever you need."

My whispered 'thank you' was a bit premature.

"If you feel comfortable here for a slight period of time then fine," he added.

I pulled my hands away and sat back, not sure what to say. First he said he didn't want to push then he went and put a time limit on recovering my equilibrium.

"If you need something brought up," he continued, "extra clothes, the Mustang..."

"Right at this moment I can't tell you what I need," I said hesitantly. "I just know that I need some time and some space. There are a lot of things going on and it's very confusing. I just know that I have to take care of the boys and find some balance, figure out what it is that I..." I let my words trail off and ran a nervous hand through my hair.

"Something we need to make clear, though, Jason," I said gravely. "Until I figure out what I'm doing, this is my home, this is where I'm staying, and the pack is my family. If you ever put them in danger again, we will have a major problem."

"When did I put them in danger?" he demanded.

"Ralph."

"Again," he denied, "no deal was struck with Ralph."

"He didn't understand that," I reminded him, "and I'm just telling you."

"Ralph would have to completely go through me to get to you," he promised me honestly, "or any of your pack, you have my word."

Something about the way he said it made me believe him. I nodded and let the subject drop.

He glanced toward the back room of the pub nervously. "Let's go check and see how the boys are," he suggested.

"They're fine." I'd wondered how long it would take him to ask about Frasier. As I stood up I added, "They were awake when I came down. They just need some rest, they look a little better."

"It will be weird getting used to two of them," he murmured, as he gestured for me to precede him across the floor.

"I was thinking that myself," I replied with a smile.

When I tapped on the door of their room, Frasier called out for us to enter. They both were glad for the distraction of visitors, and Frasier even seemed happy to see Jason. While the two of them talked quietly, I went to Petor's bedside and laid a hand on his forehead to check for fever.

"I'm fine," he protested half-heartedly, but I think he appreciated my concern.

I wanted to ask about what the Sabbath had done to them, but I didn't want to push him while he was still weak. I smiled and pulled the covers a little higher on his chest.

"Ready to go play tag with the Brujah again?" I heard Jason ask Frasier.

"Whenever you're ready, man," he grinned in reply.

"Do you want to try and get up?"

"Don't help him up," I ordered irritably. "He needs to rest."

"I could use a drink," Petor murmured hopefully.

"No, you don't need any vodka tonight," I chastised him. Alcohol was the last thing either of them needed after the sedatives they'd been given.

"You could tap it into the IV," he teased with a smile.

"Now I know you're feeling better," I replied calmly. "No, maybe tomorrow if you're feeling better." Silently I told myself it would be longer than that before either one of them went back on the bottle.

"Stick a little funnel in there," Jason suggested from across the room.

I didn't even look up. "You're not helping."

"Get a button for the shot?" he added.

"Jason," I shot back warningly.

To my relief he stopped encouraging the boys. We sat with them for a half hour or so, partially to relieve their boredom and partially to assure ourselves that they would really be okay. Not that Jason really cared about Petor, but he showed some genuine concern for Frasier's mental well being. Eventually we left the boys alone and headed back downstairs.

"When are you guys going back to Salem?" I asked as we walked into the main room of the pub.

"I don't know yet." He led the way across the room to the booth we'd vacated earlier and waited for me to sit down before he slid into his seat. "I think Brenda is leaving this evening. I was going to talk to you about it. I'm pretty sure that I'm going to be called back. Would you feel more comfortable with that for a while?"

I was surprised how much I wanted to say no, but the truth was that I needed some time alone. "It might be a good idea until I start remembering more," I replied softly.

To my surprise he didn't press the issue. Part of me was thankful, but another part wanted to cry and beg him to stay. Luckily I was able to curb that impulse while we sat there waiting for Brenda to show up.

## *Going, Going, Gone*

Your opinion what is what?  
It's just a different point of view  
Sister Hazel - Your Winter

When Brenda walked into the pub a little while later all heads turned in her direction. It wasn't that she was beautiful, although of course she was. The thing that drew everyone's attention was her clothing.

She was dressed to the nines when she strode in, with high heels and a skirt that looked like it had cost more than my Glock. With the outfit and the air of confidence that surrounded her, she wouldn't have been out of place in a fashion magazine.

Jason stood and caught her eye, motioning her over to our table. From the hesitation in her stride she must have felt like wild horses were dragging her across the room. In the time it took for her to walk to our booth, she went from looking like a confident businesswoman to a criminal headed for her own execution.

"Hello," she said softly to Jason as he stepped aside to let her sit down in the booth. She clutched her purse for a moment almost as if she expected someone to try and take it from her, then she set it on the bench seat beside her.

"Brenda," I greeted her, not quite sure how to gauge her mood.

"Hello," she murmured while refusing to meet my eyes.

"How's Rafe?" I asked.

"He'll be fine," she bit out. "He's now missing his—forget it." I could almost taste the bitterness in her voice.

"She seems to be remembering some stuff," Jason told her, breaking the awkward silence that had fallen over the table.

"Good." When she finally looked up at me I was taken aback by the cold anger burning in her eyes.

"She seems to have remembered a few things about you as well," he added.

"Good."

When she said nothing else, I took a breath and started asking questions. "What was up with the rose? Diamonds, rubies, emeralds?"

From the expression on her face I had said exactly the wrong thing. I don't think she could have looked more shocked if I'd slapped her.

"I didn't know what it was so I told her to her ask you when you got here," Jason put in when she didn't respond.

"That was a gift from Michael for the wedding," she said at last. Obviously it was a very uncomfortable subject for her. "I asked you to take it to the house and put it away so that Rafe wouldn't find out about it."

"I see." And I did see. Michael sent her a beautiful expensive gift for her wedding to another man, and Brenda hadn't wanted her husband to see it. No wonder she'd been so angry when I brought it

up. "Then there was something about Martín," I told her, changing the subject. "We were arguing about Martín and a Gangrel."

"That conversation took place in Nashville," she told me coolly. "You had resigned yourself to the fact that Jason was dead and you were going to kill his killer."

Why did everything have to be even more confusing now that I was remembering things? "Jason was dead?"

"You hadn't found him," she corrected.

Jason seemed uncomfortable with the subject. "If you will excuse me I'll let you two talk," he said, rising to his feet. "Would either of you like anything?" When we both refused him politely, he walked toward the bar.

Brenda spent a few minutes telling me how Jason had been kidnapped when he and I were traveling in Italy. She repeated that Malcolm had been the one who had captured him, how the mage had engineered Jason's embrace by a Nosferatu. "Luke and Lena helped you to find him," she concluded. "We crossed paths in Nashville."

"You didn't like Luke." It was a statement, not a question.

"No, I don't," she declared fervently.

I didn't understand her attitude but I hoped that she would explain. "Why?"

She looked away. "I have my reasons."

"Was he the man we were washing out of my hair?" I asked, struggling to remember anything more about the incident. "There was something about shampoo and you were humming the song."

"Yes, that was Luke," she said shortly. "It was when you finally admitted that you were two parts blood bound to him."

"Was that before or after you shot me?" I asked carefully watching her reaction.

She flinched, but otherwise her expression didn't change. "That was before."

All this dancing around was leaving me dizzy. If she had a problem with me, I would much rather get it out in the open now. "I'm feeling a lot of resentment here. Can I ask why?"

"To put it bluntly, I'm quite sick of this city and I'm ready to get out of it," she nearly growled. "There has been nothing but heartache since I entered, I don't particularly care for the place and I'm ready to leave."

I sat back trying to hide my shock at the venom in her words. "Nobody's making you stay."

"Hence the me leaving," she said angrily, looking away. "I should have never had to come here to begin with," she muttered under her breath.

"I didn't ask you to come," I shot back with no little resentment of my own. "You're not my mother."

Her eyes narrowed angrily. "If it wasn't for you and your goddamn causes and thinking that you can save everybody, I wouldn't be here," she said, her voice rising. "And, 'oh yeah, I can go off by myself, I don't have to ask for help.' Well no, then you fucking drag everybody down with you."

The strength of her rage left me stunned and all I could do was sit and watch while she went off on me like a double barrel shotgun.

"You worry about your boys and the fact that they were so beat up and everything," she continued indignantly, "never mind the fact that my husband was staked to a goddamn cross, and now does not have the pinky finger on his hand. All of this is because you had to save some man who not only abducted a friend of yours, but also abducted your husband and had him fucking embraced. Hmm, I wonder why there's some fucking resentment."

With that she sat back and clutched the edge of the table to stop her hands from shaking. The entire room was eerily silent, and all eyes were on our table. Even with the undivided attention I knew I couldn't let her tirade go unanswered.

"I will repeat that I didn't ask you to come here," I replied in a low and carefully neutral voice. "I can't imagine that your Christina was that much different than me, that she wouldn't have tried to take care of those that she's responsible for. Regardless of the things you say he's done, if she felt an obligation toward Malcolm and the Verbena magic, I can't imagine that she would have dragged her family into it. She would have tried to take care of it on her own." That was what I would have done if I had been in that situation.

"I'm sorry that your husband was hurt, honestly," I continued coolly. "If I could do anything to go back and change it, I would. I realize that my ghouls were not hurt quite as badly as your husband, however they were still hurt." I couldn't stop the resentment from creeping into my tone. "They are still recovering, and they didn't have some big Tremere chantry they could be taken to. You never once asked how mine are doing, for all you know they might have lost limbs."

Leaning forward she dropped her voice to nearly a whisper. "You may not have asked in words, but like every other time, you've asked with actions," she told me harshly, resentment dripping from her words, "with your irresponsibility, with your total lack of consideration for everybody else. That is how you asked."

She picked up her purse and slid out of the booth where she straightened her skirt and settled her purse strap on her shoulder before looking down at me coldly. "I'm glad that the ritual has worked," she said coldly, "and I hope you continue to get memories of what your life was like. You know how to contact me." Without another word, she turned and walked out of the pub.

I sat there for the longest time staring down at the wood grain of the table and letting her words sink in. It hurt to think that Christina might have been irresponsible about taking care of her family. I couldn't imagine doing anything that would put the pack into danger, and I didn't like thinking that there was someone inside of me who could be so careless as to risk those she loved.

At least now I knew the truth about what Brenda thought of her sister. Christina had been a lodestone around her neck, one that she was obviously more than happy to rid herself of. The only thing I didn't understand was why Brenda had bothered to come to Detroit looking for her sister in the first place.

Someone slid into the booth beside me and I wasn't entirely surprised to see that it was Scott. I knew that everyone in the bar had heard Brenda's outburst and I'd half expected him to show up.

"Apparently I'm an irresponsible, inconsiderate, miserable excuse for a Kindred," I murmured, fighting the tears in my eyes, "and it's all my fault."

Before Scott could respond to that, Jason sat down across from us. "Brenda is my ride home," he said softly. "If you want me to stay around for a couple more days I will, but I think I should give you the space that you asked for. When you feel comfortable with me coming back let me know and I'll come right away."

I'd spent the time while he was talking to blink away my tears and now I looked up at him, not sure what to say. He was being terribly understanding, and in a way that just made me feel worse. "I'm just really confused," I confessed, "and really, I need some time."

"I understand," he soothed. "Trust me, I understand more than you know."

"From what I understand I don't do anything but put everybody in danger anyway," I muttered darkly, looking away.

"There have been times," he agreed, "but there have also been times that you have saved us, that if you weren't there it would have cost a lot more lives."

"Well they wouldn't have been in the situation to begin with according to Brenda." I didn't want to give into the guilt Brenda had forced upon me so I buried it beneath the resentment I felt burning inside of me.

"Brenda tends to... over express herself sometimes," he offered kindly. "Her husband is hurt, I think she was venting."

That was putting it mildly. "Yeah, I could feel the heat."

"So could I."

"I think everybody here could," I replied, glancing around. Some of the customers were still watching our booth, but for the most part they had returned their attention to their companions or their drinks. I looked back at Jason, confusion and concern swirling through my mind. "I think the best bet is for you to... she needs somebody right now. I don't know what shape her husband is in or if Michael is still around." I hated that I still cared about what Brenda was going through even after the things she'd said to me.

"From what she said earlier, Rafe seems fairly stable and Michael has already returned to LA," he told me. "Do you need anything from home?"

I shrugged, trying not to be spun by the news that Michael had left without waiting to see if the ritual had worked. Besides, how could I know what I needed when I didn't even remember anything I had? "I think Frasier needs some clothes," I said softly. "I guess I don't really have that much either. I don't know, Howard came up with some money, and of course you gave me that card, not that I have any ID to use it."

"I could FedEx that to you," he offered.

I nodded. "I just think that it's best if..."

"As much as I also want to stay, I do understand that she needs a shoulder as well," he said sadly. "And if the situation was reversed, and I was in your place, I think you would give me the space I needed." He looked down at his hands for a moment, then smiled sadly at me. "Come to think of it, the situation has been reversed, without the memory thing."

To my surprise, he reached across the table and picked up my hand, bringing it slowly to his mouth to lay a gentle kiss on the back of it.

"I'll walk you out," I said suddenly, surprising myself.

Scott stood up without a word and stepped to one side so I could get out of the booth. Jason and I stepped outside and stood there for a moment before he turned and took me into his arms. It felt good to be held by him, good but not quite safe.

When he pulled back he leaned down to kiss my cheek. I wanted to turn my head and kiss him like we'd kissed the night before, but I knew I was too confused to deal with that right now. Slowly I reached up to cup the side of his face and felt the softness of his skin. He placed his hand over mine and kissed the palm of my hand. I wanted so badly to tell him I loved him, but I really didn't know if it would be the truth or just something to make myself feel better.

"I'll call you in a couple of days," I repeated awkwardly, wanting to say so much more. "Take care of her."

"I'll send anything I think you'll need," he assured me.

"Thank you."

He pulled me in for one last hug before turning away. Part of me screamed that I should never let him go, especially not like this. I wanted to call him back, to beg him to stay, but I just couldn't bring myself to do it.

If Brenda was right, all I ever did was put my family in danger. I couldn't live with myself if something I did got Jason hurt, or killed. Maybe by letting him walk away I'd be able to protect him the way I was sure I'd tried to do when I'd left Salem without him.

*I'm sorry, Jason,* I said silently as he turned the corner and walked out of my life.

## *You Win Some, You Lose Some*

Can you feel my desperation  
Deep inside?

Bell Book and Candle - See Ya

I must have stood outside the door staring after Jason for a long time because eventually Madelynne came looking for me. I heard the door open and turned to find her in the doorway watching me.

"So what was Brenda yelling about earlier?" she asked. "It was a little loud."

"Yes she was," I agreed, still looking off in the direction Jason had gone. "I guess I was irresponsible and uncooperative and I put people in danger."

"Oh," she drawled sarcastically, "so you're the one who brought the Sabbath to town."

"No." I glanced over at her and smiled wanly. "Although I didn't ask them to come here, it's my fault because they have to clean up after my mess."

"What mess would that be?" she demanded softly. "Because I don't recall one. It would have been a mess if I had hit you in the road."

"Yeah, that would have been a mess," I agreed, trying to smile.

"You didn't call them," she reminded me. "They came to you."

"According to Brenda, my disappearing has made them rescue me," I told her, "and it's not the first time my actions have put them in danger and endangered myself."

"I don't understand why they had to come and rescue you," she murmured. "I guess I'm missing the point here. You were completely fine, you weren't hurt, you couldn't remember, but you were fine. They're the ones who showed up, they're the ones the Sabbath followed into town. If it weren't for them, we would have been fine. Petor would have been fine, you would never have gotten hurt."

"Really, if they'd killed Roger in Salem a year ago, he wouldn't have come here now," I added. "She just acted like frequently went off on—noble causes, or something along those lines, where I would take off by myself and they would have to come rescue me."

"Obviously you can't defend yourself because you have no memory of this," she said reasonably. "Maybe she's just full of shit. She must not want you to remember her that bad. For being a sister, she sure doesn't come across very nice."

That made me laugh a little. "Well, you know, I seem to remember her being controlling."

"She's not in control now," she reminded me.

Perhaps that was what Brenda didn't like about the situation, not being in control. If that was the case she was welcome to stay the hell out of my life. "And Jason just..."

"He's done a complete change, hasn't he?" she asked dryly.

"Yeah, he's all nice," I agreed in the same tone. "'I'll give you whatever space you need.'"

She glanced toward the parking lot. "Is he staying?"

"No, he's going back." I couldn't keep the wistful tone from my voice. "You know, okay, they're all so hot for me to remember and when I finally start remembering they all leave. Michael's already gone."

"What did Jason say when Brenda was ranting?"

"He wasn't there," I told her. "He went off and left the two of us alone so we could talk and didn't come back until after she'd gone."

"Did either of them know of the memories that you've gotten back?"

"I talk to them about it before her rant," I confessed. "I asked Jason a few questions and he told me a little bit more of the circumstances surrounding the memories I have of him. Then Brenda showed up and she was, well, Ventrue-ish."

"What?"

"Her clothes," I said, remembering the very expensive outfit. "She didn't fit in. high heels, designer dress, whatever. She came in and sat down, and I guess her husband is missing a finger."

"God forbid," she muttered. "At least that's all. It could have been worse."

I told her how the conversation had gone, how Brenda had been very concerned about her husband but a great deal less concerned for my boys. I explained what Brenda had told me about the memories I'd shared with her and how none of what I said seemed to please the woman.

"Now that you're remembering her she's not happy," Madelynne murmured. "She wasn't happy when you couldn't remember her, she's not happy when you do."

"Apparently I can't make her happy for anything," I admitted. "She went off on this whole rant thing about putting everyone in danger and being irresponsible and uncaring, and all this other stuff. She was pissed off about Rafe missing a finger, but you know, she never once asked me about how the boys were doing."

"Did she ask how you were doing?"

"No."

"Sounds like everything is about her," she muttered, shaking her head in disgust. "She seems a very self centered, self absorbed, uncaring sort of person."

Tonight she had seemed that way, but in some of my memories she had been much different. "I don't know. Then she just walked out and Jason came back over. He kind of apologized for her."

"He shouldn't have to apologize for her," she reminded me. "She should be responsible for her own actions."

"Yeah." I looked back toward the parking lot, wondering if they'd even left yet. "He's going home with her because someone has to take care of her. Michael's already gone," I added, trying not to feel like he'd deserted me. "Jason's going to send me some clothes for Frasier and some ID so I can use the credit card he gave me last night. He's going to send some of my things too."

"Sounds like he was a little more understanding than she was," she commented.

"Yeah, and you know that almost made it worse because he was all understanding about me needing time and space," I admitted.

"Did you expect him to push it?" she asked softly.

Had I? "Yeah, I think I did."

"Would you have been happier if he had pushed to stay here by your side every waking moment?" In the dimness of the overhead lights I could feel her watching me carefully.

"No, but I think I'd be a little less confused," I admitted sadly. "Up until the point where I started remembering things they were all right there, wanting me to remember, pushing me."

"Maybe he realized that he was wrong," she suggested.

I shrugged. "It just seems like as soon as the ritual was done all of a sudden I'm not good enough for them." I didn't want to care, but their reaction hurt me deeply. "Especially for Brenda, and Michael just taking off like he didn't even care if I remembered."

"You expected more from him?" she demanded.

"Not from Michael, no," I said dryly. "Truthfully I'm surprised he participated in the ritual."

"Well, you know how to get a hold of them," she reminded me, "and they obviously know how to get a hold of you."

They all had my cell number, and Brenda could just open a line into my brain if she wanted. "I told Jason I'd call him in a few days," I told her. "I just don't know what I'm gonna say."

"Maybe in a few days you'll know," she soothed. "Give yourself time. Let it go for now and put it behind you. Make a fresh start with what few memories you have."

"I still don't know if I can trust them." That had been the whole reason I'd wanted to do the ritual in the first place.

"I guess that's something you'll learn in time as you start to remember more," she said comfortingly.

"If I remember more," I muttered, wondering if I would.

"I suppose it depends on how much contact you have with them and how they act," she suggested.

"I'm not going to have much contact if they're in Salem," I reminded her. "And I can't imagine Brenda's going to call me any time soon."

From the look on her face she agreed with me. "She'll get over it, and if not, oh well. It doesn't seem like that would be that big of a loss."

"No, I think I could live a good many years without dealing with another rant like that one," I said dryly. "I think we all could."

Talking with Madelynne had made me feel better about myself. I still wasn't sure where I stood about a lot of things, but at least I no longer believed that Brenda's assessment of me had been correct. I knew I wasn't perfect, that there were a lot of things I could have and perhaps should have done differently in the past few nights, but I couldn't believe everything that had happened was my fault alone.

## Epilogue

Yesterday is not ours to recover, but tomorrow is ours to win or lose.

Lyndon B. Johnson

The return of my memories took a few nights to get used to, especially since I didn't have anyone from my past to talk to about them. I know I could have called any one of them, but the way they all left before the twenty-four hours was up left a bad taste in my mouth.

Of course Michael did send me a large bouquet of flowers that first night. It was beautiful and expensive, which didn't impress me much. On the other hand the letter he sent with the flowers made me think a little better of him.

He told me that he knew I'd be confused when the memories returned and that he didn't want his presence to cloud the issue further. He wants me to call when I'm ready to talk about the past, even offered to send his plane for me to join him in California. He passed along a message from Antonio expressing his regret that he had been unable to come to Detroit, and wanted me to contact him when I could.

Amazingly enough Michael had anticipated the fit Brenda had thrown. He wanted me to understand how difficult my disappearance was on her, especially coming on the heels of her honeymoon, Rafe's injuries notwithstanding.

I called Zach to ask about the stone Frasier had been wearing and to see if there was some way to find out where the child I'd created was. He informed me that the stone had been formed through a Tremere ritual that I would have to perform myself if I wanted another one. Of course he would teach me how, if I left the pack and came back into the Tremere fold. I told him I'd think about it and didn't bother to bring up Arcady.

Scott came to me near dawn that first night and honestly it felt good to be in his arms, maybe a little too good. I wanted to be with him, but as much as I wanted to share the closeness we'd had the night before, the memories of loving Jason were too fresh in my mind. For a moment I went with the kiss, but then I pulled away and looked up at him.

I didn't have to say anything, he seemed to know exactly how I felt. I needed time to get things straight in my head, to figure out where my conflicting emotions were going to lead me. The last thing I needed to do was make things more complicated for myself. He held me until the sun rose, but when I woke the next evening he was gone.

I stayed in bed that night to heal. Frasier and Petor sat with me for a couple of hours, and we talked things over as I rested. I thought Frasier would have protested my decision to stay in Detroit, but he was okay with it. It seems that I'm not the only one who was disappointed by my family abandoning me just as it looked like I could regain my past.

I realize they had things to take care of, wounds of their own to heal. Still, it seems to me that as hot as they were to begin with for me to get my memory back, they should have cared a little more when I actually did. Who knows, maybe I needed this whole mess to finally realize just how much my family didn't really care about their precious Christina.

The night of inactivity was good for me, gave me a chance to think things over. I can't bring back my past, can't will away the memory loss and return me to the blindfolded little girl I used to be. There is no way to go back and undo the damage that has been wreaked on my relationships during the stress of the last few nights. All I can do now is look to the future.

According to everyone else, I've lived the last eight years under Tremere control, all my Kindred life. Now my memory loss has given me a chance now to learn what being Kindred with free will is all about. I have no way of knowing if Chaos sent me to Detroit to save me or himself, and I'm not sure I care. It seems to me that I should take this opportunity to find out exactly what it is I want out of the rest of my life.

Granted my lack of communication with the Tremere clan means that many of the avenues I'd once had available to me are now closed, but there are still enough opportunities open for me to be okay with that. It's enough to know that the Tremere will take me back if I swear their blood oaths again.

I'm not willing to give up my freedom, not just yet. Things are too good here with the pack. I've found friends that will accept me for who I am, that will never want me to change so I can fit into their perfect lives. I'm free to be who I want to be, no matter what that is, and I can't tell you how important that is to me.

I want to live a life free of blood bonds, expectations and limits. With the pack I have that. I want to be trusted for my abilities and loved for who I am. With the pack I know I'm accepted unconditionally.

I've found a new home here, a new family. Maybe it's not the home and family I once had, but it feels good to me, feels right, and I want to see where it takes me.