



*Choices*

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## *Souvenirs of the Past*

AND WE WONDER, YES WE WONDER  
HOW DO YOU MAKE SENSE OF THIS?

DAVID CROSBY - HERO

Most of the people who visited Walker's Pub were shop rats, men who stopped in on their lunch or after work for a drink or two before returning to their boring jobs and dull lives. Many were regulars who perhaps spent too much of their lives drinking. Others drifted in and out, never to return.

I sat at a corner booth and listened as Frasier O'Connell and Petor Andrews argued good-naturedly across from me. They were pouring over the paper discussing cars, of all things. Frasier wanted us to buy something that would be easy for him to learn how to drive, while Petor wanted something a little more challenging. Unfortunately, I didn't have the money to buy two vehicles, and since I was the only one of us with cash, someone was going to be disappointed.

"I'm not sure how well I can drive," I reminded Petor. "I know you want a little more action, but we need to find something that will work for everyone."

He looked disappointed, but he didn't argue with me. I studied his face in the dim light, and to my relief he looked well. He'd been through the ringer a few nights ago, and I wasn't sure he was quite healed from it. Frasier'd had an easier time of it considering he'd had more vitae to help him along.

I'd talked to Alex Marcus quite extensively about the men's medical condition, and while I was assured that they would mend completely with time, I still hated the fact that they'd been injured to begin with. They were my responsibility, after all, and I'd failed in my duty to look after them.

Last night I'd given both of them my blood, but cautioned them not to use it for healing. I wanted them to be strong and ready if we had somehow missed killing a member of the Sabbat pack that had kidnapped both of them only days ago. While they were still a little bruised and Petor had a cracked rib, they would heal in time.

We were sitting in the pub instead of prowling the streets for two reasons. The first was that we weren't sure where Patrick was and I wanted to stick close to home in case he decided to show up and bother Madelynne Walker, our hostess and leader of the Gangrel pack we lived with. Patrick had turned up at the pub a few nights earlier and while he'd left easily enough, there was no guarantee that he wouldn't return.

The second reason we were inactive had to do with my healing. While most injuries I could heal with a simple expenditure of blood, some things took a little more time and effort to repair. On the night I'd rescued my boys I'd been injured by a set of claws that left one of those more difficult injuries.

I'd called Jason Kline shortly after sundown but was unpleasantly surprised to get his voice mail. I'd left a short message asking him to call me, and now I was waiting so impatiently for my phone to ring that when it finally did I almost didn't hear it. After fumbling it out of my pocket, I pressed the answer button.

"You rang," a deep voice said in my ear.

"Jason," I breathed, pleased he'd called back.

"Yes. How are things going?"

"Okay," I said slowly. "I'm trying to heal up after our encounter with the Sabbat. Well, actually with my encounter with Ralph's people, so not doing much of anything tonight, just hanging around. What's up with you?"

"Not much. I stopped to see an old friend for..." he paused for a moment before adding, "sorry, moral support."

I suppose he needed it, having lost his wife. The fact that I was his wife didn't matter since I didn't actually remember much about him. "How's everyone else? How's Rafe?"

"Last I knew he was doing okay," he told me.

"Last you knew? I thought you lived with Brenda."

"I haven't heard from her in a day or so."

That threw me. "Okay, she hasn't been home or you're not living with Brenda anymore?" Brenda Brown was... difficult to deal with, but I couldn't see her kicking Jason out of the house.

"I'm in LA," he clarified.

"Oh."

"How's the whole spooky-boo memory thing doing?" he asked. "Is anything getting clearer or are you remembering old times?"

"I really haven't remembered anything other than what I told you when you were here," I admitted. "I'm waiting for something else to turn up." I hoped it would help clear up the confusion I'd been left with after regaining some very conflicting memories.

"Anything I can do to help trigger that?" he offered.

"Well, it's kind of hard when you're in LA," I reminded him gently.

"I'm only going to be here for another day or so, maybe less."

"Then where are you going?"

"Back home," he told me. "Salem, unless you have something else in mind."

As a matter of fact, I did. "I was hoping you could stop back through Detroit. We could go have dinner together or something."

"You know something?" he said with a chuckle. "I think that's the first time you actually asked me out. I like this."

I had to laugh with him. "It's the only time I remember asking you out."

"Trust me, it's the only one," he said firmly. "You did say you wanted to start making new memories."

"Yeah."

"What time is good for you?"

I tried not to let the relief I felt at his easy agreement show in my voice. "Probably an hour or two after sundown would be good."

"I'll have to see the prince when I get in," he murmured. "Where would you like me to meet you?"

The pub wasn't good, Madelynne didn't exactly like or trust him, and with good reason. "We could just meet at the Renaissance Center," I suggested.

"Any place specific that we're going?" he asked. "How should I dress? Should I dress like me or dress like you?"

I looked down at the jeans and tank top I was wearing under my leather jacket. "I'm probably dressed about like you at the moment," I guessed. "So I'll see you then?"

"All right."

An awkward silence filled the line that I wasn't sure how to break.

"Love you, hon," he said at last. "Bye."

"Bye," I echoed, not willing to repeat the love part when I didn't know if I loved him. Granted, I had loved him once, but losing one's memory tends to sever all emotional ties. A part of me hoped that I would eventually feel as I'd once felt for him, another part thought it just as well I was beginning a new life.

"Hot date?" Frasier asked in a carefully neutral voice.

I glanced up to realize that both he and Petor had been listening while I was on the phone. "Yes," I replied calmly. While I knew that my relationship with Jason affected both of them, what I decided to do with the man who was once my husband was my choice, not theirs.

He glanced at Petor, who nodded almost imperceptibly. "We've been thinking," Frasier began.

"That could prove dangerous," I said softly.

My interruption didn't seem to faze him. "We don't think it's a good idea for you to go back to Salem."

I stared at him in surprise. I would have thought that Frasier would be anxious to go back to the city he'd called home for the past year. "Why?"

"You were taken from your room there—"

"I went willingly," I reminded him.

"—right out from under our noses," he continued as if I hadn't spoken. "The Tremere didn't protect you and they don't seem to care that much about you now. Plus none of them like Petor."

Which to me was reason enough to stay away from Salem, but I wasn't going to tell them that. "He's my ghoul," I said firmly. "It's not for them to like or dislike him."

"But they don't trust him," Frasier insisted stubbornly. "They might take it upon themselves to... correct the situation."

"Kill him, you mean," I corrected him. I reached across the table and laid my hand over Petor's. "We're not going to Salem any time soon," I promised him. "I know how they feel about you and I'm not about to put you at risk."

He shrugged as if it didn't matter, but I knew it did. The last week had been just as hard on Petor as it had been on me, although in different ways. It couldn't have been easy to pass out in some remote town in Russia and wake up in America bound to a vampire that didn't remember who she was. Then the Salem group had been so suspicious of him and, of course, there was the Sabbat torture he'd endured.

I let the subject drop but I silently vowed that nothing would happen to Petor or to Frasier for that matter. They were both my responsibility, and no matter what I'd been like before I'd lost my memory, I wasn't about to fail them now.

Around eleven, a deliveryman came in through the pub's front doors bearing a large trunk and several boxes. It crossed my mind to wonder why he was delivering so late, but that thought slipped from my mind when Lucas called me over to say that the packages were for me.

I followed Frasier and Petor while they took the packages back to the elevator and got it up to my room. I'd been waiting for this shipment since Jason had returned to Salem, and I was impatient to find out what kind of things I'd left behind.

We'd just gotten settled and I'd barely opened the first box when someone knocked on the door. When I called for whomever it was to enter, Scott Murphy walked in. He was tall with long

dark blonde hair and intoxicating eyes. The moment I'd first seen him I'd felt an attraction to him that had seemed so familiar to me, although I'd never met him before coming to Detroit, and honestly wouldn't have remembered him if I had.

"Heard you had a delivery," he said softly.

"Come sit down," I told him, patting the bed next to me. "We were just getting started."

He strode across the room and joined me, nodding to the boys as he sat down.

I bent back to my task and took the lid off the first box. I don't know what I expected to find, but an expensive 35mm camera wasn't at the top of my list.

"Brenda bought that for you," Frasier told me from his perch on the edge of the dresser. "She thought it would help you adjust to living in Salem."

Picking up the camera, I realized it felt familiar in my hand. It was loaded with a partially used roll of film, and I made a mental note to have it developed some time soon. The camera itself was a nice one, professional quality and fairly expensive. Either Brenda knew a lot about cameras or she'd asked the right questions when she'd bought it.

Under the camera was a selection of CDs and movies that Frasier said were among my favorite. Unfortunately, I didn't recognize any of them. There were about a dozen books in the box as well, mostly covering amnesia and the Verbena Tradition of Mages. To my surprise there was also a worn King James Bible.

The second box held mostly clothing, and to my relief most of it was casual. I'd already discovered I felt most comfortable in jeans and a tank top and I was glad to find that my tastes hadn't changed with the loss of my memory.

"Where's all my stuff?" Frasier mumbled irritably as I turned my attention to the trunk.

"Maybe you should call," I suggested. I sure as hell wasn't going to call Brenda, and Jason wasn't even in Salem.

Lying on top of the trunk's contents was a journal of sorts. Flipping through it I saw that the handwriting was my own, and the contents detailed a number of dreams I'd had over the last seven years. Near the end of the written pages Malcolm Robbin's name caught my eye. I sat the book aside knowing I'd read it thoroughly later.

Next was a spiral notebook that Frasier identified as the one I'd kept notes on the Trimuritive in. A quick glance showed that the information it contained was not very detailed, but Malcolm's name showed up more than once. Setting it aside with the dream diary, I moved on to the next item.

I picked up a swath of rich blue velvet that seemed to have something long and thin wrapped in it. As I started to unwrap it, Frasier spoke up again.

"That was Lizzy's ritual knife," he told me softly. "Robert gave it to you shortly before your wedding."

"Who is Lizzy?" I asked curiously as the velvet fell away to reveal a beautifully detailed black handled knife.

"She was Malcolm's girlfriend," he explained. "After she died, Malcolm attacked you with it." I glanced over at him in surprise, but he seemed sure of what he was saying. "Robert said he went into your father's house after you disappeared and took it, along with a few other things."

"Why did he attack me?" I questioned, confused.

He sighed a little. "He blamed you for her death."

I didn't understand, but maybe there would be something in the journal or the notebook that would explain. I wrapped the knife back up in the velvet and went for the next item in the trunk.

"That was another thing Robert retrieved from your father's house," Frasier said as I lifted out a weathered camera case. "Marcus had given it to you when you were in high school."

"Marcus Thorpe," I murmured, studying the USC Berkley sticker on the case. "My first boyfriend." The camera looked about ten years old and must have been expensive at the time. It was empty of film, but from the looks of things it had seen a lot of use in the past. Brenda had claimed that Malcolm had killed Marcus, but of course I couldn't remember. I hoped that something in my belongings would have the answers I was looking for.

Under the second camera was a photo album. Unlike the one Brenda had given me last week, this one looked fairly new and untouched, although there were photographs inside. The first picture was of a dark haired man I'd been told was Marcus looking very thoughtful. When I had first come to Detroit I'd been carrying a similar picture of him.

"Robert had those pictures too," Frasier told me. "Jason was pretty upset when he saw them, but you managed to calm him down."

The next picture was also of Marcus, looking even more pensive than the first one. After that was one of me leaning against a wall and staring quite seriously at the camera while wearing a leather jacket. Then there was a picture of Marcus standing next to his motorcycle and looking off at something to his right. The next photograph was of a man and a scantily dressed woman standing very close together.

"She's naked," Scott murmured, looking over my shoulder.

"Actually, I think she's wearing a bathing suit," I corrected softly.

"Let me see," Petor said, coming closer to the bed. When I turned the album to show him, he pointed at the next picture where the same man was kneeling by himself. His hair was long and twisted into dread locks, and there were holes in the knees of his pants. "That looks a lot like Chaos," he told me.

Frasier joined us. "It's Lord Malcolm," he said coldly. "The woman is Lizzy."

"You don't like Malcolm either?" I asked, looking up at him questioningly.

"No, I don't," he replied grimly. "The man took over my monastery by pretending to be a god. Not much for morals there."

"He seemed nice enough when I saw him," Petor spoke up. "He wanted to make sure Tina was safe. The other guy was there too, but I didn't catch his name."

"Marcus?" I asked in surprise. "I thought he was supposed to be dead."

Petor shrugged. "I saw him there."

"What exactly do you remember of the castle?" I asked him.

"Not much," he replied.

"You remember those two," I prompted. "What were they doing?"

"Chaos was telling me to keep you safe," he reminded me. "The other guy was just standing there."

"Do you remember anyone else?"

"There were others there," he admitted, "but Chaos is the only one I have a name for."

"I don't remember him so I can't form an opinion," I murmured as I sat the photo album aside and lifted a black leather jacket from the trunk. I recognized it from one of the pictures of Marcus. Under it was a brown leather jacket that looked about my size.

"The black one was Marcus'," Frasier confirmed. "You told me that Luke had bought you the brown one. You didn't like to wear it because you thought it would bother Jason."

A small jewelry box was next, and I opened it to find a beautiful pair of silver earrings lying inside with a delicate moonstone ring. Stuck to the bottom of the box was what looked like a small round Band-Aid.

"That's a communications device," Frasier murmured. "Why would you keep it in there?"

"You don't know?" I asked.

"I've seen the box, but you never showed me what was inside," he replied. "I think Luke bought you those things, and you didn't like to talk about him."

"Why?"

He shrugged. "You were trying to break the blood bond. His name almost never came up."

I let the subject go mostly because it was no longer important. I didn't remember Luke Thomas, and probably never would.

When it was clear we'd looked at everything in the boxes, the boys went back downstairs leaving Scott and I alone. It was the first time we'd been alone together since the night I'd regained some of my memories. That night he'd simply held me while the rising sun claimed out consciousness.

That night I'd been confused about who I was and where I belonged. Tonight I felt much better about the choices I'd made. Tonight I wanted more than to just be held, and Scott was more than happy to give it to me.

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

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

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

*Our bodies fit together perfectly as we moved around the floor. Slowly I inhaled the scent of Jason's skin beneath his subtle cologne. Very faintly I smelled the Kindred vitae within him and I smiled. Jason was a wonderful dancer and I loved being in his arms. I enjoyed every movement, every touch of his body on mine.*

The sound of voices pulled me from my sleep. The sun was not quite down, but I was still roused enough to open my eyes and look toward the door where Frasier and Petor were struggling in the light from the hallway.

It took me a minute to realize that I was naked as was Scott who was beside me and reaching for the covers. Through confused eyes I watched Petor try to push Frasier out the door.

"But she said we were supposed to be in here when she wakes up," Frasier protested, staring toward the bed.

"I think she'll understand if we're not in here tonight," Petor said firmly, pushing him through the doorway. By the time he got him out of the room, Scott had pulled the blanket up over my bare form.

I groaned and buried my head in the pillow, cursing softly. I'd known sooner or later that the boys would find out I was sleeping with Scott, but I hadn't necessarily wanted them to find out this way.

"Sorry," he told me as he reached for the lamp. "I should have gotten up." Scott was normally an early riser; the last night he's spent in my room he'd been long gone when the sun went down.



When he moved to get out of bed, I laid a hand on his leg to stop him. "No, it's my fault. I should have told them to stop coming in here at sundown. Not that it really matters; I wasn't exactly planning on hiding it from them. They were going to find out sooner or later."

He settled back down and I smiled at him. I couldn't honestly say I loved Scott, but I was comfortable with him. He never seemed to expect anything out of me, he just accepted me without question. Perhaps love would come in time, if we had time. If it didn't, at least we had tonight. I would take what I could get.

"Are you in a hurry to get up?" I asked softly, running my hand up his thigh. "I don't think the boys will be back in."

He grinned and stretched out beside me. I liked the feel of his body, the strength of his muscles beneath his cool skin. While this was only our third night together, he seemed to know all the right places to touch me. I hoped with time I could do the same for him.

Our lips met and I closed my eyes, letting his touch blot out the world.

## *Here and Now*

WE BURN LIKE A HOUSE ON FIRE

NO MATTER WHAT YOU KNOW THAT TO BE TRUE

CONCRETE BLONDE - I DON'T NEED A HERO

Monday night I was waiting at the Renaissance Center's parking garage an hour after sundown. I knew Jason wouldn't recognize the SUV Petor had purchased so I parked where I could see the entrance but not be totally visible when a taxi dropped him off. I was having doubts about the sanity of spending the evening with him, but when he came back down and stood at the curb looking around I knew I had to show myself.

When I pulled up to the doors, he looked up at me and smiled. I waited for him to climb in and put his seatbelt on before I pulled away from the curb and into traffic. We exchanged a few awkward pleasantries before deciding to find a bite to eat.

Hunting didn't take long, and afterward we agreed on a movie. It was an action adventure, and we both enjoyed it. When it was over I had to fight the urge to call the guys and check in.

Jason seemed to have noticed my preoccupation. "How's Frasier?" he asked softly.

"Better," I told him. "He and Petor have mostly healed, and I don't think there will be any lasting effects from their capture."

"That's good."

Once in a while I caught him running his tongue over his newfound fangs as if he were still uncomfortable with them. I found it charming. "I like the fangs," I said softly. "They're very attractive." I wasn't going to mention that Scott had fangs too.

Jason grinned. "Better than a tail." He told me that he had rented a hotel room so that we could talk uninterrupted. While I wasn't sure I wanted to be alone with him in that kind of situation, part of me jumped at the idea and I found myself agreeing before I could think better of it.

Once in the room, we spent some time talking about how we had met and the early part of his relationship with Christina. Apparently someone had been trying to kill her, and he'd been trying to keep her alive.

Eventually the talking gave way to kissing. It was strange, kissing him now. The last time we'd kissed his teeth had been normal; now his fangs were extended permanently, just like Scott's. While I'd already gotten the technique of kissing a vampire with fangs down pat, Jason's kisses were much different than Scott's.

In Jason's arms I felt loved, even adored. It was as if he had worshiped the woman he had married. In his arms I could forget my amnesia and let his love wash over me. It wasn't until I felt his hand on my breast that I pulled away.

"We don't have to do this," he said softly, noting my apprehension.

I lifted my eyes and looked at him, struck once again by the attraction I felt toward him. I didn't understand where it was coming from but it seemed like something elemental in me wanted to be with him. Without answering him I lifted my lips to his.

My nervousness forgotten, I was lost once again in his embrace. Somehow our clothes seemed to melt away. His skin was smooth and cool beneath my hands, feeling at once strange and familiar to me.

Much later we cuddled against each other, sated. In his arms I almost felt safe, almost. A part of me longed to tell him I'd return with him to Salem and pick up where we had left off, but I knew I couldn't do it.

"Was it always like this?" I asked softly against his skin. My hand was on his chest and the hairs there felt soft, too soft compared to the hair on Scott's chest.

"Always." Jason lifted the chain that held my wedding ring, but thankfully he didn't mention the fact that I wasn't wearing it on my finger. "Except I never had to worry about making my plane afterwards."

I glanced at the bedside clock and realized that it was nearing time for Jason to return to the airport. Sighing, I rubbed my cheek against his chest, relishing in the feel of his skin on mine. I wished there was some way I could talk him into staying, but I knew it wouldn't be fair of me to try.

"I'd ask you to stay, but I know you don't particularly like it here," I told him.

"It's not that I don't like Detroit," he protested. "Detroit doesn't like me. This time we dated in your city, next time we should do it in mine."

I wasn't sure how to answer that, so I just said nothing. As much as I wanted to see him again I didn't know if I could risk traveling to his city.

"Frasier wouldn't mind it," he added. "You could bring Petor too. It's just for the night."

Just the mention of them made me want to check in and see how they were doing. I glanced at the phone, but managed not to jump up and dial the pub.

"We can talk about it later if you want," Jason said when I didn't answer him.

"I'm sorry," I said softly. "I've really enjoyed the time we've spent together, but I'm not sure I'm ready to come to Salem."

I could tell he didn't like my reluctance, but he didn't try to argue with me. After we dressed I drove him to the airport. Because dawn wasn't too far away, we said our goodbyes on the sidewalk and I didn't wait around to watch his plane fly away into the night sky.

Driving back to the pub I tried not to feel guilty for sleeping with Jason. A part of me knew that we were married, but another part felt like I'd cheated on Scott. I wasn't sure which part to listen to, but the part of me that sided with Scott seemed to be yelling the loudest.

Thankfully I didn't have to face Scott when I got to the pub because he was gone. Maggie and Emily immediately wanted to know what had happened on my date, obviously wanting to know if I'd slept with Jason but too polite to outright ask. I noticed that Alex was listening to our conversation quite closely, though he never asked any questions to me directly.

I went upstairs with just enough time to shower and get ready for bed. When I walked into my bedroom I found Frasier and Petor inside waiting for me. We talked for a little while about our finances and belongings. The problem was that we really didn't have much money. While I knew the pack would let us stay with them, for now, I also knew we couldn't depend on them to support us indefinitely.

The boys and I talked over several possible solutions, but nothing that would help us in the short term. They offered to find jobs, which I was grateful for. I still had no idea what I knew and didn't know, and it would be much easier for them to find work, being mortal, than it would be for me.

When I could feel dawn getting closer, I told them we'd finish the discussion tomorrow night. They'd both stood and were nearly to the door when Frasier stopped and looked at me.

"Did you sleep with him?" he asked bluntly.

Petor rolled his eyes and turned away while I shot his companion a harsh look.

"I don't think that's any of your business," I said firmly, getting to my feet. I hadn't answered anyone else when they'd asked that question, I wasn't about to start now.

He didn't appear chastened. "I think you're wrong," he shot back. "If there's a chance we could be going back to Salem, I want to know about it."

"We won't be going back to Salem," I told him. "Not that he didn't ask me to."

Frasier walked over to stand just a bit too close to me. "Look, Tina, I don't want to overstep my bounds," he said apologetically. "I just want to know where we stand."

From the corner of my eye I saw Petor slip silently out of the room. "Where we stand?" I asked softly.

"I've waited a year while you played house with Jason," he told me. "I think I deserve to know where things stand."

I reached up and cupped the side of his face. "I'm sorry if this has been hard for you, Frasier," I said gently. "I can't tell you where things stand when I don't know myself. I know that I loved Jason before I lost my memory, and I think I should give those feelings a chance to bloom again."

"What about Scott?" he demanded.

"Scott is... Scott," I said with a wry smile. "He doesn't make any demands on me, he accepts me for what I am. I need that right now."

"You know I can give you anything you need," he protested.

"I know," I answered. "I just need time to figure out what I want in the long run. I'm not going to say there will never be a time for us, but now is not that time."

He laid his hand over mine and bent to kiss my forehead. "I understand, Tina. Just know that no matter what I'll be waiting for you." With that he left me alone.

My thoughts were a tangled mess as I waited for the sun to come up. Had I done the right thing to sleep with Jason? With Scott? Would be any easier if I gave Frasier the relationship he seemed to want so badly, and forget about both vampires?

By the time the sun came up I had decided that sleeping with Frasier wasn't the right thing to do, at least not right now. Unfortunately, I hadn't made up my mind about the other two men in my life.

## A Brother's Advice

THE BITCH OF IT IS THAT YOU PROBABLY DID THE RIGHT THING. BUT YOU DID IT IN THE WRONG WAY, IN THE INCONVENIENT WAY. NOW YOU HAVE TO PAY THE PENALTY FOR THAT. I KNOW IT STINKS, BUT THAT'S THE WAY IT IS.

BABYLON 5: RISING STAR

*I slowly laid my hand on his arm, not quite sure if Cormac would allow the touch. "Look, we don't know each other that well and I know it was a shock to find out that we're related," I told him softly, "but I just wanted you to know that I'm glad we are."*

*He put his hand over mine and smiled. "Me too."*

*With the softness of his voice and the smile on his face, I could see why Eliza hadn't been able to resist him. On impulse I moved closer and hugged him. It felt really nice when he put his arms around me and returned the embrace.*

When I woke the boys were gone. Before I could panic too badly I found a note stating that they had gone to the Zombie Zoo with Lucas and Jolie. While I didn't like the fact that they'd left without checking with me first, I was glad to get a bit of a break from Frasier. He'd been... well, clingy wasn't really the word I was looking for, but he was always there, even when I'd rather he wasn't.

Lying next to the note they'd left me was a packet of information from a local bank. It appeared that they had opened a bank account during the day as I'd asked them to. The balance was a couple of thousand dollars, but I knew it wouldn't last us long.

I spent the next few hours helping out where I could in the pub. I wasn't much good at waiting tables, or even tending bar, but I could fetch and carry for Carissa, and clean. When the boys got back near midnight I chastised them for leaving without telling me first.

"You want us to wait in your room until you wake up?" Frasier asked, making both of them blush and laugh. Obviously they had both been drinking way too much and there was no reasoning with them, not tonight.

I was playing pool with Frasier when my phone rang. Glancing at the clock when I pulled it out I saw that it was almost one in the morning. The caller ID on the phone showed only 'Brennan'. I excused myself and moved toward the door to the back room, feeling the need for privacy. I really wasn't sure what to expect, but I did want to talk to Cormac. I opened the line and put the phone to my ear. "Hello," I said guardedly.

"Tina." His use of my name earned him brownie points. "I was just calling to see how you are faring," he told me.

How was I faring? "Better."

"Yes," he murmured. "I hear the fight, while it ended well, did not start that way."

"Are you talking about the fight with the Sabbath or the fight with Brenda?" I asked seriously.

"The fight with the Sabbath," he said slowly. "Brenda has been rather more guarded of late."

"I wonder why," I drawled. "The fight, well, we killed the bad guys, got the ghouls out. Took a couple of nights to heal, but everybody's fine. How's Rafe?"

"He is healing."

I breathed a mental sigh of relief that I wouldn't have his life or health on my conscience. "That's good."

"It took some time and it was rather a long process," he added, "but he will be fine, physically at least."

At least Brenda would have to stop blaming me for the loss of his finger. "Actually I'm glad you called," I told him, anxious to turn the topic of conversation away from Brenda. "I wanted to thank you for coming to Detroit and performing the ritual."

"It was the least I could do," he said sadly.

"If you say so," I agreed. "Cutting your finger off is not a little thing."

"I would have cut off my whole hand had I been able to return your entire memory to you," he told me seriously.

I didn't know what to say to that. While by bloodline he was my brother, what few memories I had of him were so conflicting I couldn't honestly say how I felt about him.

"I do have good news," he added. "I spoke with Summer, my contact. The art has returned."

"Their magic?" I asked, feeling rather excited. "Really?"

"Yes," he assured me. "It appears that whatever mission led you away from us and to Detroit was a success. Their magic is returning slowly and it is more balanced than it has been in several years."

"Well, at least my 'noble cause' had a good ending," I muttered, unable to keep the bitterness from my voice.

"You cannot hold Brenda accountable for her emotions," he said softly. "She does care for you. She does not understand as we do," he continued, "what it is like to forget your past and have it come back and—"

"Bite you in the ass," I finished with him.

"As you remember old responsibilities," he continued.

"I have remembered a few things," I admitted, "but it's very confusing."

"Any time you feel the need to talk, you have my number," he offered. "About anything."

"If you're not busy, I did have a few questions," I told him.

"Ask away."

"Like I said, I've had a few memories that are very confusing," I began hesitantly. "Kind of extreme, actually. Is that normal?"

"Yes," he assured me. "The memories that first returned to me, and to you the first time, were intense, either good or bad."

"Some of them are more indifferent than anything," I replied, "but most are intense." I wasn't sure how to tell him about the memories I had of him, so I figured it was best for me to just say it. "I remember being very happy to see you because you were the only one I could talk to about some things, but I also remember that I resented the hell out of you."

"I do not presume to know all of your thoughts," he said softly, "but I believe the resentment was not directed towards me personally, but rather toward our shared sire for not taking a stronger hand in your upbringing."

"From what I understand he took no hand in it at all," I said dryly.

"Yes. He was assured by the eldest of our clan in the United States that you would be taken care of."

"The Tremere," I murmured. While they kept telling me that was my clan, I didn't feel Tremere. I felt more Gangrel than anything. "He was assured that I would be taken care of," I repeated slowly, "but I was found in an alley?"

"By Antonio," he reminded me, "who cared, and still does care for you greatly."

"I'll take your word for it," I murmured. I remembered quite vividly him dominating me into submission, but perhaps that was the way he showed affection.

"He is a lot like Brenda," he told me softly. "They know no medium."

"Or patience, or tolerance, or etiquette," I continued, "or tact."

"That's often been said about me," he said dryly. "Would you care for a copy of the letter in which Dougal mentions you? It is not much."

"Yes, I would." At this point not much was better than nothing at all. "Speaking of letters, may I also have a copy of the letter that I wrote to you from Russia?"

"Certainly, I will send it along," he agreed. "The other purpose for my call was to see if you had any interest in attempting to relearn some of the Tremere art."

"I keep trying that Auspex thing, but its hit and miss," I admitted. "It doesn't always work."

"I'm referring more to the Thaumaturgical rituals."

"I would be interested," I said quickly. "Now that I think about it there was absolutely nothing in the stuff that was sent to me."

"Yes, Brenda took care of that," he replied dryly. "I will be sending out the remainder of your personal effects from your room at the chantry, but with it I have gained my prince's permission to compose a ritual primer for you."

"Really?" That surprised me. "They're actually going to let me learn some Thaumaturgy stuff? 'Cause Zach said I couldn't unless I went back to the chantry." I'd called him to ask about a necklace that Frasier had in his possession, but he'd refused tell me how to make another one.

"They will not teach you Thaumaturgy itself," Cormac told me. "These are the rituals. Admittedly they are low level rituals that all neonates are taught."

"What is the difference between Thaumaturgy and rituals?"

"Thaumaturgy is the art of the blood magic," he explained. "A ritual is what we did when we visited the pub. It ties to the blood magic, but my hopes are that these basic rituals will open your mind and open your memory to what you once knew."

"Hopefully anything I'll regain will be a lot less confusing than what I already have," I murmured dryly.

"Don't count on it," he warned me.

"It's almost worse than it was before knowing anything." At least before I remembered the people from my past I could mistrust them without remorse.

"Do not allow me to take up too much of your time," he told me. "If you think of anything more, feel free to call me."

"Okay." It sounded like he was busier than I was. "I appreciate your call and again I want to thank you for performing the ritual."

"You're welcome," he said warmly.

"And I'm sorry I was a little impatient with you before," I added.

"Nothing new," he murmured.

"Am I usually impatient?"

Silence burned the wire for a long moment before he simply told me good evening. I returned the salute and hung up.

Cormac had given me a lot to think about. I hoped that he meant what he'd said about sending the Thaumaturgy primer, but only time would tell. I went to find Madelynn to let her know what was going on.

I found her in the office going over paperwork. "Hey, Cormac called," I told her. "He was nice."

"Your brother?" she asked in surprise. "He really didn't seem that rude while he was here."

"Probably not," I admitted. "Anyway, he was really nice this time. He's sending me some Thaumaturgy stuff so I can relearn it."

"Really?" She seemed as surprised as I had been.

"It occurred to me that there was no Thaumaturgy stuff in what was sent," I told her, "and you know how Zach told me I couldn't learn any of it."

"Why would they send it to you?"

"He's hoping it will help me regain my memories."

"When are you supposed to receive this?"

"He didn't say," I admitted, "he just said that he was composing the primer. It depends on how long that takes, I suppose."

"Do you need to go to the Tremere to work on this?" she asked suspiciously.

"I don't think so," I told her. "I think I get to do it all by my big girl self. I'm sure there will be detailed instructions in the primer, and if it involves going to the Tremere, then I guess it waits."

"Well, if it does then they're probably going to want you to stay there, to keep it in a controlled environment," she reminded me.

"That's why it would have to wait a long damn time," I replied dryly. "I'm not in any hurry to put myself in the hands of the Tremere, thank you very much. I like having free will. A lot." She laughed and I grinned at her. "Oh, and the Verbena magic is coming back, so I apparently succeeded in that whole 'noble cause' thing."

I wished I could feel better knowing that Christina's choice to save Malcolm Robbins had been the right one, but I didn't.



## Notes Between Sisters

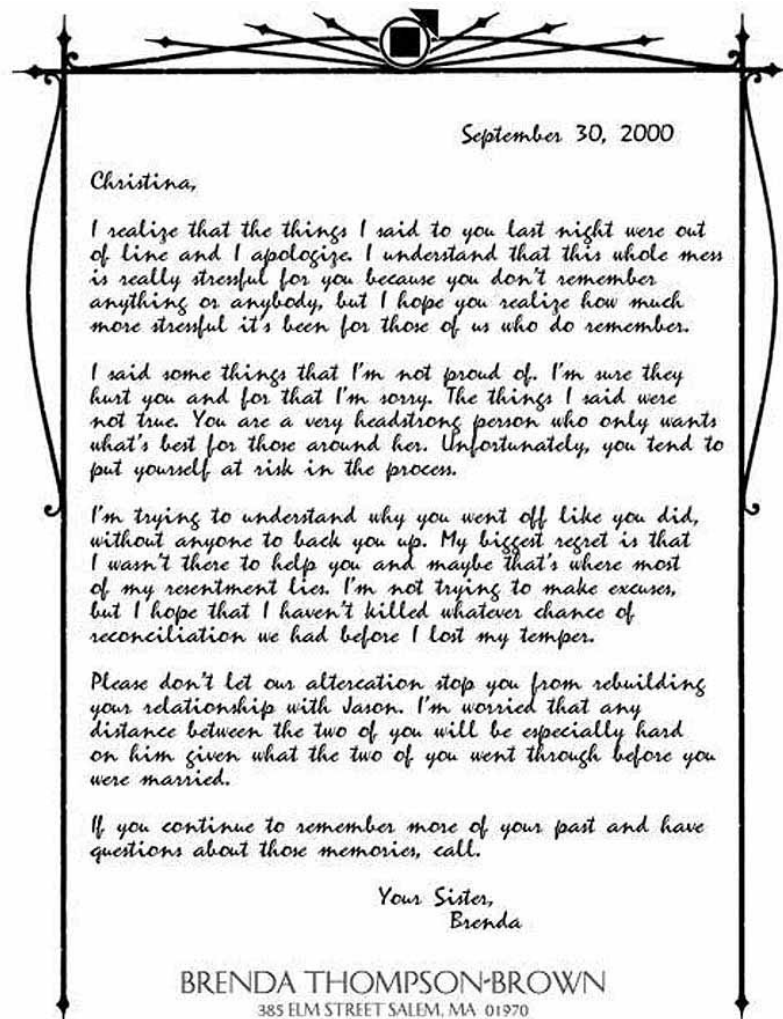
IF YOU COULD EVER UNDERSTAND  
WHAT YOU PUT ME THROUGH  
O-TOWN - TAKE ME UNDER

When I woke Wednesday night, I found that Frasier's belongings had been delivered along with a bright yellow 1999 Mustang that was registered to Christina Kline. Petor had left a note telling me he'd already gone over the entire vehicle and it was in excellent condition. He'd apparently made a few adjustments to the engine, but it was safe for me to drive it.

The boys were gone again, but this time they had a better reason. Scott had arranged for them to interview at one of the local automotive factories, and they had both been hired. I knew their working was the best thing for all of us and tried not to worry about their safety.

Madelynne and I went for a spin in the Mustang and the speed was enough to take my breath away. Well, if I'd had breath that was. Regardless, it handled well, and I was grateful that the boys and I now had a second vehicle. Sitting at the pub waiting for them to get off work wasn't exactly my idea of a good time.

When I went back to my room to hang up my coat I noticed a box on the dresser with an envelope addressed to Christina Kline lying on top. I didn't recognize the handwriting, but it was feminine so I was betting it was Brenda's. With apprehension I opened the envelope and sat down on the bed to read the stilted handwriting within.



I tried not to let her words get to me, but the letter started a low burn in the pit of my stomach. She apparently thought my amnesia was harder on her than on me, and I couldn't help but wonder how well she might have behaved if the situation had been reversed. At least she'd apologized for her outburst, but that didn't make things right between us. Hell, she'd accused me of being irresponsible and inconsiderate of my family's safety.

On the other hand I could almost see her point of view. She'd come to Detroit expecting to rescue me from some noble cause I'd gotten myself into. Instead, she'd gotten nothing from me but a hard time, and to top it all off, her husband had almost died at the Sabbat's hands.

That hardly meant that I should forget my anger at her and let bygones be bygones. It just meant that I should give her a chance to redeem herself. Brenda wasn't the only one who'd said a few harsh things that night, after all. I distinctly remembered telling her she wasn't my mother and that I hadn't asked her to come after me.

Scott showed up just after the pub closed for the night having come straight from work. He returned everyone's greeting then strode over to where Madelynne and Logan were sitting to talk to them for a few minutes before going upstairs to shower. When he came back down I was playing pool with Maggie, but when he came over she made some flimsy excuse to leave us alone.

He gestured for me to rack the balls, and I did so without a word. Picking up his usual pool stick, he drove the cue into the rest of the balls, breaking them expertly. At first I felt a little uncomfortable because I wasn't sure how he felt about my date with Jason. As the game progressed and he didn't mention it, my tension eased.

I shook my head at my own stupidity. Scott wasn't one for creating boundaries, or accepting them for that matter. He was most definitely his own man, and as long as I didn't try and tie him down, he wouldn't make any judgments on my life.

When we were alone in my room much later I tried very hard not to think about my evening with Jason only a few nights before. I can't say that being with either man was better than being with the other, but it was definitely different. Jason had made me feel loved, but Scott made me feel safe, although it was more than that.

We were so much alike, Scott and me, and I knew I could surrender my troubles to his strength. I knew that he would never try and handle my problems for me, but he would help me in whatever way I asked him to.

I knew that he wasn't watching me, waiting for another woman to look out from behind my eyes. He accepted me for who I was, enjoyed being with me without wanting me to change at all. When I lay in his arms near dawn I was happy in a way that I could not remember being with Jason.

*I barely had time to register the size and tastefulness of the room when I spotted Brenda at the top of the stairs.*

*"Christina!" she exclaimed cheerfully as she bounded down the stairs toward me.*

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

When the sun went down pulling me from my daytime slumber, I laid alone in the darkness thinking about the woman I'd once considered my sister. For the first time I tried to put myself in her shoes. She had come home from a happy honeymoon with every intention of spending quality time with her sister and instead had been faced with my disappearance. When she had contacted me through a mind link, I had done my best to shut her out. In fact even after they had come to

Detroit I had rejected every overture she and the others had made toward me until they had proved that I was in fact the Christina Kline they kept telling me I was. Even after I had begun to remember my past I hadn't exactly been warm and fuzzy with any of them.

To top off the pain and confusion of losing a sister, she'd been faced with the torture and temporary deformation of her husband. Of course, Michael Moorecock's presence hadn't helped the situation. Brenda's ex-lover had done his best to antagonize everyone except Jason.

In all reality I didn't see where I would have handled the situation as well as Brenda had. If either of my boys or even one of my pack mates had gone missing then turned up with amnesia, I would have done my damndest to bring them back under my protection.

My crusade to help my ex-mentor and my rejection of all things Salem had cost her dearly. I had to admit that the harsh way I'd treated her had been no more justified than the hateful things she'd said to me on her final night in Detroit.

I still wasn't sure how I felt about Brenda, hell I didn't know how I felt about anyone from my past save Frasier. Regardless, I knew I had to give her a chance to prove that she could be more than the abrasive bitch I'd seen in the last few weeks just as I had to show her I wasn't the irresponsible childe she'd accused me of being.

Hours later when I sat down with a blank page in front of me all I could think about was the anger and resentment I'd felt the night she'd left Salem. I knew that I had to release some of that antagonism or it would taint the letter I wanted to send. I decided to spend a few minutes writing out my anger in the hopes that I could purge enough of it to be able to write her a decent response. When I was done, I felt much better.

Laying aside the first draft, I began the second.

October 4, 2000

Brenda,

I would like to begin by apologizing for the inconvenience of your visit to Detroit. Cormac tells me your husband is healing, and I sincerely hope that his condition continues to improve and that, like Peter and Frasier, he will have no lasting complications from his injuries. Your shipment arrived yesterday, and I would like to thank you for sending the remainder of my things as well as Frasier's belongings. I must say the car came as a welcome surprise.

There is no need for you to apologize for your outburst when we last met. I think much of what you told me had been building for quite some time, and it is best not to let that sort of thing fester. You were correct in saying that if I'd been more willing to put my family at risk and less willing to help ~~an~~ entire mage tradition, you would not have had to come after me. From what I understand my actions did in fact help the Verbena, so perhaps my efforts weren't quite as wasted as you believed.

I don't mean to offend you by those words. Today I dreamed of what I think must have been the night I moved to Salem. We met in a huge lobby, and I remember thinking as we embraced that I felt like I was coming home. I wish I could remember more of my life, and I know that we were close, so much like sisters. Remembering that night I can honestly believe that this whole mess has indeed been harder on you than it has been on me, and I'm sorry.

The truth of the matter is that without the bulk of my memories I cannot be the woman I once was. As it is I am having a hard time understanding how the few memories I have regained relate to my old life, although both Jason and Cormac have been willing enough to

help me try. I know that by blood I am of your clan, but at the moment I think it is best I remain in Detroit. While I am with the pack you can be assured that I am in the best of hands, and you will not have to worry about my safety or your clan due to my actions.

Again, I don't wish to offend you. I know that while you were in Detroit I said quite a few unfair things both to you and the others that I should not have said, and for that I'm truly sorry. I honestly would like to rebuild the relationships that were lost with my memory and perhaps with this letter we can begin again with a clean slate between us.

As much as I would like to, I cannot yet tell you why I left Salem alone. If things were as you say, I would not have cared about the risks to myself. It is my belief that Chaos retains some affection for me, and from what I can tell I have long believed that to be true. Maybe I thought I had a better chance at completing my task alone, or perhaps I intended to exact my revenge on Malcolm without anyone interfering. I hope that some day I will remember exactly what my reasons were.

Much of what I have remembered is vague and contradictory at best. The range of emotions runs from resentment and betrayal to love and trust. For instance, I believe I remember the night Antonio found me, the threats he made and his willingness to force me into telling him about myself. On the other hand I also remember wishing that he had been the one to embrace me, and knowing without a doubt that he felt the same way. Of course I have no idea what order the things I remember actually occurred in, but I can make reasonable assumptions.

I'm not sure why you would believe that I would base the

possibility of a reconciliation with Jason on the last conversation you and I had. Of course, I don't really remember what you thought of me before, but it seems to me that no one trusted my judgement in men so perhaps you are right to be apprehensive.

Regardless of what I may have been like before, please rest assured that I honestly believe I loved Jason long before I left Salem, and I plan on giving myself every opportunity to feel that way for him again. As you may have heard, he visited me on his way home from L.A. and we spent most of the night together before he continued on to Salem.

While I in fact do have many questions about my past, I hesitate to bombard you with questions so I will limit myself to only two. First, what were the circumstances surrounding Antonio finding me after my embrace? Cormac made it sound like the clan arranged for Antonio to take care of me, but from what I can remember we were both surprised when we met.

Second, you mentioned something about causes, and made it sound like I frequently ran off to take care of everyone else without regards to my own safety. Could you be a little more specific about that? Maybe if I know more about mistakes I've made in the past, I'll be less likely to make them again.

I look forward to hearing from you soon.  
Tina Andrews

After rereading the letter, I sat back, satisfied. While I knew that some of what I'd written was a little harsh, overall the letter said everything I wanted to tell her. I folded it and placed it in an envelope that I addressed and set aside for Petor to mail in the morning.

Looking over our finances once again I was reminded that the money wouldn't last forever. Yes, the boys had jobs now, but I couldn't spend the rest of my existence sponging off my ghouls. There had to be something I could do to make money. When I thought about my life in Salem, and what everyone had told me I'd done there it hit me.

Before my memory loss, I'd worked security for the clan. I knew I hadn't lost any of my instincts on the subject because I'd had many conversations with Scott and Logan where I'd been able to discuss the matter intelligently. Frasier seemed to be just as up on security techniques and weapons as I was. Petor had been in the Russian army and was quite familiar with firearms.

Starting a security firm seemed the smartest thing for me to do. We could focus initially on human society, working as bodyguards for the suits and any visitors that might come into town. It might be hard going at first, but there was no reason to believe that we couldn't make it work.

Frasier liked the idea of working for a security firm. He seemed to think it would be exciting and glamorous. Petor, of course, would do anything I asked him to. Alex and Emily were also interested in working for me if I could actually get the business off the ground. I needed backing, and a building, and so many other things. Madelynne suggested that I look into getting a loan, which seemed to me the only choice.

The next few nights were busy ones. I continued to regain memories, usually in the form of dreams just before I woke in the evening. One of Antonio was particularly bad, but for the most part the memories were unremarkable.

Petor and Frasier began complaining that they wanted to move out of the pub. They claimed that the room they shared was too small for both of them. Scott's idea of a solution was for me to move into his room since he had an apartment elsewhere he could stay in until we got things settled. I agreed, but I knew it wouldn't be long before the boys started asking for more freedom again.



# *Happy Anniversary*

TAKE ME, TOUCH ME

HOLD ME LIKE YOU MEAN IT

BON JOVI - LOVE ME BACK TO LIFE

Jason and I had agreed to meet at the Holidome in Flint on the 9th of October. He'd booked a suite but wouldn't tell me about any plans he made. He said he wanted to surprise me and left it at that, but I thought I had an idea of what the surprise was all about. The Colt 1911 that Cormac had given Christina for a wedding gift was inscribed with that date one year earlier, so it wasn't any stretch to figure out it was their anniversary. I took great pains to find a small gift for him, and hoped he would like it.

I was a little nervous about going to Flint, but since the boys were coming with me I thought it would probably be okay. They'd never be more than a phone call away if they needed me, and Frasier would still be close enough for me to locate the necklace he was wearing.

Of course I had to pay the prince of Flint a short visit before meeting Jason. It was a little strange since he knew me and I didn't remember him, but it was over quickly. Petor drove to the Holidome and both men decided to come in with me to get the lay of the land. Frasier even said something about wanting to say hi to Jason, and I didn't want to discourage him.

When we entered the lobby Jason was talking with a short woman with long dark hair. He was holding a briefcase, wearing jeans and a black leather jacket over a white mock turtleneck shirt. His hair was neatly combed and he had a look of freshness about him. By the time I dragged my eyes away from the tempting sight of his muscular frame, he had finished giving the girl instructions and she was moving off.

When at last he turned and saw us walking across the lobby toward him, I had eyes only for the girl. I wondered who she was and why Jason had been talking to her. I wondered if he'd moved on with his life like I'd been trying to move on with mine. I wondered if he'd realized I was sleeping with Scott and decided to pay me back.

I was brought out of my musings by the touch of Jason's lips on my cheek. There was no sign of guilt in his eyes as he pulled a white rose from inside his jacket and handed it to me. I thanked him softly and gave him a brief hug, but let Frasier carry the weight of the greetings as I stared off in the direction the girl had disappeared.

It didn't make sense that I felt such a rage of jealousy over what was probably an innocent meeting, but I felt it nonetheless. I found myself wondering if she posed a threat to Jason and had to shake my head at the direction my thoughts were going. Jason was not under my protection, I had no right to dictate how he handled his safety.

Bringing my attention back to the men around me, I realized that Jason had greeted Frasier like an old friend. While my ghoul hadn't rebuffed his friendship, Frasier's response was a little cooler than it could have been. Jason even shook Petor's hand, but I could see the effort that being so friendly cost him.

Jason broke a moment of awkward silence by suggesting we leave for our date. I agreed, but asked him for a moment with the boys before we left. Thankfully he agreed, and I led my ghouls out of his range of hearing.

"Find out who the girl is," I ordered softly. When Frasier looked down the hall, I knew I didn't have to explain further. "Let me know what you find out."



I watched them walk away before returning to Jason's side. I took his arm and looked up at him with a smile that I hoped would distract him from wondering why the boys hadn't left the hotel. "Do you have any plans for our date?"

"I do," he replied, staring down into my eyes.

He led me outside where a long white limo waited for us. When he opened the door for me, I saw a small pile of gifts lying on the seat. It made me pause as I climbed inside, but I didn't mention them. I was just grateful that I'd picked up a gift for him.

"I didn't know how to bring this up when we were on the phone last," Jason said, looking uncomfortable as he settled down next to me and the driver pulled away from the curb. "But today is our anniversary." He looked at me then as if he expected some kind of reaction from me.

I simply nodded. "Brenda told me the Colt was a gift from Cormac for our wedding," I reminded him. "I thought the date on the barrel was probably our wedding day. I remember—" The flash of the one memory I had of our wedding went through my mind and I couldn't help but chuckle. "You looked good in a tux."

He grinned but looked away almost as if he was uncomfortable talking about such a personal subject. I hoped it was his normal shyness and not the fact that I didn't remember much about such an important day. "Thanks," he said as he looked back at me. "All I can remember is how beautiful you looked coming down the aisle. I'll never forget that moment."

I closed my eyes and turned away, knowing that if I'd only trusted him just a little more I wouldn't have gone off to save Malcolm and lost my memory. "I wish I could remember it," I admitted softly. "I remember you giving a toast and how—" I almost said 'how much I loved you' and just barely managed to stop before the words spilled from my mouth. Bringing the 'L' word into this would only complicate things even more. "How you kissed me. In a way it doesn't seem real."

"It was real, honey," he assured me. "Believe me, it was very real." He put his hand gently along the side of my face, his body language telling me that he expected me to pull away. "Happy anniversary, baby," he whispered, his hazel eyes pouring liquid fire into my soul. "Will you let me kiss you?"

Let him kiss me? I was dying for it. I didn't bother to answer, simply leaned forward until our lips were touching. The kiss was tentative at first, but when neither of us pulled away the emotions between us caught fire. I felt the skin of his cheek against the palm of my hand and treasured the texture of his skin on mine. His arms went around me and pulled me closer until only the barrier of our clothing separated us.

It was easy to forget the distance between us, easy to push thoughts of Scott to the back of my mind, easy to forget we were in the back of a moving vehicle. Our clothes seemed to melt away until skin met only skin from temple to toe. The cool touch of his hand along the length of my body left warm trails on my skin. My fingers itched to run along every inch of his body, to learn the curves and planes as well as he knew mine.

Passion filled me until it was all that I knew. Our lips met and danced even as our bodies moved together. I pulled him closer to me, even closer, and tugged on his hair for better access to his mouth. The passion built until I could no longer concentrate on his kisses. I turned my head and kissed at his shoulder and neck, lost in the moment.

A long time later I came back to my senses and realized that the car was still moving. Suddenly I realized that the driver must have been perfectly aware of what Jason and I had been doing. Embarrassed, I reached for my clothes even as I realized that it was way too late for

modestly. I turned my face against Jason's shoulder and was grateful that as a vampire I had no need to worry about blushing.

Jason pulled me closer against him as if well aware of the reasons for my embarrassment. "If you get dressed, you can open your presents," he whispered against my hair. I laughed self-consciously and fumbled for my clothes. From the corner of my eye I watched him dress, appreciating the lean strength of his body.

Before he had a chance to pick up one of the packages from the seat across from us, I took the present I'd bought from my bag and handed it to him. "You first," I insisted.

He seemed extremely pleased that I'd remembered that it was our anniversary. He took the package with one hand and hooked the other around the back of my neck and kissed me deeply. For a moment I was lost in the feel of his lips against mine but the swaying of the car brought me back to reality and reluctantly I pulled away.

"I don't think we should give the chauffeur another show, once was enough," I murmured. "Open your present."

He seemed pleased with the leather holster I'd found for the guns he normally carried. His gift to me was a leather journal that he hoped would represent a new chapter of our lives. I thanked him with a kiss and opened the present Brenda had sent with him.

To my surprise, the package contained a ritual bag complete with a number of ingredients that the letter Brenda had included told me were necessary for certain Tremere rituals. Unfortunately she hadn't sent me any of the rituals themselves, but I was still holding out hope that Cormac would keep his word about the primer he'd promised to send.

My phone and Jason's rang at about the same time. Frasier told me that he'd lost the girl, but I assured him it was all right and he shouldn't worry about it. Jason seemed to have been talking to the girl and when we both hung up, he said that she'd called to tell him about her tail.

"She's a werewolf?" I asked.

"Don't play dumb," he said with a smile. "You know what I'm talking about."

I shrugged, not willing to admit how jealous I'd felt when I'd seen them together. "Who's Sarah?"

"My ghoul," he admitted in a serious tone. "Having Frasier around spoiled me. I got used to someone doing the day for me."

I thought it strange that he had taken on a ghoul so soon. Hell he didn't even know if I planned to stay in Detroit, and here he'd bound another woman to him. I stopped my thoughts before letting them get too far. I did plan on staying in Detroit, and Jason had every right to do what he thought would make him safe.

We spent the next few hours in the hotel suite, talking for the most part, though we did have sex again. This time I couldn't help but think of Scott, couldn't help but feel guilty that I was sleeping with another man.

After making arrangements to meet him the next Sunday, I said my goodbyes in the room. Biting back the tears of guilt I made my way down to the lobby where the boys were waiting for me.

I felt worse when I got home and had the pack around me. Scott and I didn't exactly have a commitment, but I knew that everyone was hoping we would eventually settle down together. I got the impression that while Scott was far from celibate he'd never taken to anyone like he seemed to have taken to me. It didn't matter that I was supposed to be married to Jason,

sleeping with him had felt wrong and I told myself I wouldn't do it again, not until I got things straight in my head.

Showering didn't erase the feel of his hands on my body, and even laying in the bed I'd shared with my lover couldn't chase away my memories of Jason or the feeling that I'd betrayed Scott. I curled into a ball and cried myself to sleep wishing I'd never remembered anything about Jason or the love he and Christina had shared.

## *Everyone has Needs*

I NEED U FOR DARK REASONS, DEAR  
FOR GREED AND LUST AND SEED AND FEAR  
JEWEL - RUN 2 U

The next evening Madelynne asked me how my date with Jason had gone. I told her without admitting I'd had sex with him, trying to bury the stab of guilt that shot through me. "He had a ghoul with him," I added.

"His ghoul?" she asked.

"Yeah. He said he missed having someone around to watch over him during the day."

"That sounds lame," she replied coolly.

"I didn't like her," I admitted. "I didn't even meet her and I didn't like her."

"It seems suspicious, doesn't it?" she added. "I mean, he ghouled her pretty quickly?"

I had to agree with her assessment of the situation. I might have asked Frasier what he thought about Jason's new ghoul, but his strange behavior had continued over the past few nights. I hadn't noticed it at first because it had started gradually, but now his near constant touching was becoming more and more aggressive.

Somehow I managed to find a moment alone with Petor to ask him if he knew what was going on in Frasier's mind.

"Well, given what little bit I've seen of the Ghoul - Domitor relationship, it seems to me that there are two versions. The assistant/Bodyguard/daytime eyes, like me and Logan's ghouls. I thought that Frasier was this too. Then there is the puppy/lover like Rafe and Brenda and Mac and his Eliza. Perhaps Frasier wants to be that kind of ghoul."

He seemed a little dismissive of the subject, almost as if he knew what his place was and it didn't matter to him what roll Frasier filled in my life.

Near midnight I was putting laundry away when Frasier cornered me in my room.

"I'm hungry," he said softly, his deep voice echoing through the room.

"There's food in the kitchen," I reminded him as I turned to put a pile of shirts into a drawer. I almost jumped when I heard movement and realized he was right behind me, so close I could feel the heat radiating off of him.

He ran his fingertips down the side of my neck. "I'm hungry for you."

My eyes shot to the mirror where I could see the hunger in his eyes as he stared down at my skin. I could almost smell the desire he so obviously felt. I turned and backed against the dresser, anxious to put room between us, but there was nowhere for me to go.

"Sit down and I'll feed you," I told him, my voice rough.

"I'm not a little boy," he drawled. "Besides, we might get some on the sheets."

I barely stopped myself from snorting at the thought of Frasier spilling any of my blood. When he fed he licked every last drop away as if it would be his last. "Maybe I want to sit down," I replied coolly.

Without a word his hands encircled my waist and he lifted me in the air far enough to sit me down on the edge of the dresser. Moving closer, he stood between my knees and slowly lifted my wrist between us. I heard a click and realized that he'd opened the small knife he always kept in his pocket.

"Frasier—" I began. When he looked at me with raw hunger in his eyes I couldn't finish the thought.

"May I?" he whispered as he brought the knife closer to my vein. Wordlessly I nodded, still unable to speak.

I felt the cool steel against my flesh for an instant before he applied the light pressure that was all it took for the sharp blade to break the skin. Carefully he brought the knife to his mouth and licked the blood from the blade before setting it aside and turning his attention to the wound he had made.

Blood welled at the surface of the cut and had just begun to run down my arm when Frasier lifted it to his lips. Slowly, languidly, he ran his tongue along the path the blood had traveled before settling his mouth around the wound. I could feel him draw the vitae into his mouth and closed my eyes against the erotic sensations it sent through me.

I felt the fabric of his shirt against my face and realized dimly that he had moved close enough for me to feel the length of his body against mine. Being this close to him awakened my own hunger and I turned my head to inhale the warm scent of his skin.

For a brief moment I remembered that it had only been a little more than a week since the Sabbat had sunk their fangs into him, feeding from him, draining him too close to the point of death. Only the night before Alex had assured me the boys were well and truly healed. The strength in the arm that went around my waist and pulled me tightly against Frasier's body told me that Alex was right.

I could feel the length and heat of Frasier's arousal rub lightly against the crotch of my jeans, but it only drove my hunger to new heights. My fangs dropped from their hiding place, pushing against the inside of my lips, and instinctively I gave in to their silent insistence. Turning my head just a little, I opened my mouth and sank my teeth into the warm flesh of his neck.

As I felt the hot rush of blood enter my mouth, I could feel the moan of pleasure that broke from his chest. His arm tightened around me, pulling me even closer until I felt every hard unyielding inch of him pressing against the material that separated his body from mine.

I might have enjoyed it a great deal more if I wasn't already involved with one too many men. As it was my feelings for Frasier were almost too complicated for me to deal with. Like Scott, he accepted me for who and what I was now. Like Jason, he seemed to love me a great deal. Like Petor, he needed my protection and my blood. Feeding him was a heady experience to say the least; so much more intense than when Petor drank from me.

For long seconds punctuated by the beat of his heart we drank from each other. In many ways it was much more provocative than anything I'd ever experienced with Jason or Scott. Feeding brought the sexual tension between us even higher, until I wanted nothing more than to tear off our clothing and give him the sex he wanted so badly.

The thought was like cold water splashed on my face. I pulled my fangs from his skin and pushed against his chest to break the contact between our bodies.

"That's enough," I said sternly. When he looked at me with puppy dog eyes, I ordered, "Now, Frasier."

He let go of my hand with great reluctance and I brought it to my mouth to close the wound even as I pushed him back with my other hand.

"Tina—" he began, but I didn't let him finish.

"Go downstairs. I'll talk to you later."

He went, but I could see in his eyes he didn't want to. Hell, part of me didn't want him to, but I had more than enough men in my life, I didn't need another complication, and I sure as hell didn't need more guilt than I already had. I followed him out a little while later, after I'd regained my composure.

A few hours before dawn I was standing near the back of the pub watching Frasier and Petor play pool. I sensed more than heard Scott move up behind me and I leaned back against him when his arms went around my waist.

"Come stay with me tonight," he urged softly.

I suppose I should have expected his invitation, but it had surprised me. It also tempted me more than I cared to admit. "I don't want to impose," I replied reluctantly. I also didn't want to leave the boys alone.

Gently he nuzzled the side of my neck. "Please, impose."

His deep voice sent shivers down my spine, and I knew I didn't have the strength of will to refuse him. Staying the day with him would mean leaving the boys alone, but realistically there wasn't much I could do to protect them when the sun was in the sky. And I had to start trusting them to take care of themselves some time, didn't I? As much as I wanted to keep watch over them all of the time, it just wasn't feasible.

"All right," I said at last. "Let me get a few things."

With a last brush of his skin against mine, he moved away to talk to my ghouls. I went upstairs and came down a few minutes later with an overnight bag in my hand, making Frasier and Petor stare at me in surprise.

"Where are we going?" Petor asked.

"We aren't going anywhere," I told him with a smile. "I'm going to Scott's."

My ghouls shared a confused glance that I did my best to ignore.

"Let me get this straight," Frasier said, walking toward me. "You're going to spend the day somewhere else and we're not going with you."

I shifted restlessly, not comfortable with the reminder that I was leaving them to take care of themselves. "Is there a problem with that?" I asked, looking at Petor.

"No," he assured me quickly. "We're just surprised, that's all. Go. Have fun. Наслаждайтесь."

I smiled and turned to Scott, who had come up beside me. "Ready?" I asked. When he nodded, I told the boys to take care of themselves and followed my lover out of the pub.

"Chris!"

*I turned to see that the others were all inside the stairwell, though I couldn't see their faces and that the door leading to the bar was closed. I let go of the doorknob. "What?"*

*As they started up the stairs, Brenda spoke from the front of the group. "Do you want to get shot walking into something blindly? Have you forgotten everything that you know?"*

*I raised my eyebrow at her and took a step away from the door. You are the Mother but not my mother, I told her in a mental warning.*

*Well if you didn't act like an impertinent child and walk into a situation blindly, she chastised me, then perhaps I wouldn't have to act like your mother. I understand that you have a strong need to return to our world, but—*

*Acting as if I were bored, I pulled out my gun and popped the clip to make sure it was fully loaded, then snapped the clip back in. I put the gun back in its holster and waited patiently for Brenda to finish.*

*That's more like it, she told me with satisfaction.*

*I leaned against the wall with my arms crossed under my breasts and one leg cocked over the other, unconsciously adopting a stance that was as natural to me as feeding.*

When I returned to the pub the next evening after spending some time hunting, I learned that Frasier had taken advantage of my absence and slept with Emily. I also learned that it wasn't the first time they'd slept together.

It was clear that he'd done it simply to make me jealous. Emily was quite open about it, and about Frasier's skill in the bedroom. While she didn't come right out and say how well endowed he was, or how long their encounters lasted, I got the impression that either he was very good in bed or she was in on his plot to get me to sleep with him.

"She's like that with almost all the guys," Maggie told me later. "It's just the way she is."

"I'm just worried about Frasier," I replied softly, trying to downplay how much it bothered me that they had slept together. "What happens when she moves on to someone else?"

"I'm sure he'll be fine," she replied with a reassuring smile. "He's got you to take care of him."

I watched Frasier brush Emily's hair back from her face, and of course the woman loved every second of it. I turned away so I wouldn't have to see it only to find Scott standing behind me. Without a word he opened his arms to me and I stepped into them.

Scott was a comfort to me, that was a fact, and in his arms I felt safer than I felt anywhere else. What I now realized was that what had begun as my only comfort was slowly changing into something else.

While I'd been dating Jason, I'd also been dating Scott. He seemed to know all the good places to go in the area, bars and nightclubs. These were places that didn't necessarily appeal to the mainstream Kindred like Ventrue, or Tremere, but they were places I liked quite a bit. They always had good bands and ample hunting. I knew that he didn't have the money that Jason seemed to have, and he didn't have the worldliness of Christina's husband, but that just made him easier on my mind.

Though the entire pack was rather casual about touching each other, the way Scott touched me in public was more like the way Logan touched Madelynne than any thing else. I had to admit that I was more familiar with him as well.

Everyone knew that Scott and I were dating, they even knew generally where we went when we left the pub together, but it didn't seem like he was giving out personal information the way Emily had about Frasier. Emily had outright asked me what I thought of Scott in bed, but told her the same thing I told Maggie when she asked about Jason; I don't kiss and tell.

It wasn't Scott's dating skills or the places he knew that was winning me over, nor was it his obvious talent in bed or the way he made me feel safe. Scott liked me, really liked me, for who and what I was. He was becoming important to me, more important than just the security blanket he'd been for me in the beginning.

## Christina's Grief

DID YOU LOSE YOUR PLACE?

DID YOU LOSE YOUR GRACE?

JOSH KELLEY - EVERYBODY WANTS YOU

*Cormac moved to the girl's side and sat down on the table. He pulled his gun from the holster and pressed it against her forehead, but I couldn't see her face. "I killed Micky like the dog he was," he said in a low serious voice that was as cold as ice, "I'll kill you like the bitch you are." He pressed the gun against her head hard enough to rock it backward. "Knock it off and shut up."*

I woke with a start, surprised and a little frightened by the memories my dream held. I'd known that Cormac had a cold side to his personality, but to talk about killing so coldly... it was frightening to remember. It took me until I was out of the shower to dismiss the feelings the dream had evoked, and when I went downstairs I had something else to think about.

Carissa had a package for me that had arrived during the day. She gave it to me with a glass of cold blood as I sat down at the end of the bar. The bold handwriting on the label told me it was from Cormac.

I looked at the package for a long moment debating on whether to open it or not. Then I remembered that he was going to send me a Thaumaturgy primer, so I asked Carissa for a knife to cut the tape.

Inside of the package was a leather bound journal, a videocassette, a yellow candle, and several notes, one to me from Cormac, one to Cormac from me, and one from Dougal Galloway to someone named Gami. Flipping through the journal I saw that only the first twenty or so pages were written on. The writing was Cormac's and the topic was, of course, Thaumaturgy. His note was short and to the point.

Here is the primer we talked of last week. I've included enough supplies for you to try each ritual several times, but I'd advise you not to try and push the matter. Your abilities will come back in time.

I'm also sending the two letters we spoke of and a videocassette of your wedding to Jason. I wasn't sure if you wanted to see it, but if you don't then just send it back to me.

I didn't quite know what to think about the videocassette. Cormac had seemed much nicer the last time I'd talked to him, more understanding. Was this his way of pressuring me into returning? I didn't think so; he had after all left the door open for me to return the video unwatched.

Whatever his reason for sending the tape I was glad it was still early in the evening; the boys wouldn't be back until nearly midnight, and if Scott was going to show up it wouldn't be until much later. I didn't know how I'd react to seeing Jason and Christina's wedding, and I didn't want them to see me upset if that was my reaction.



"Hey," Madelynne said as she sat down beside me. "Looks like you got lots of stuff today." With that she sat a letter down on the bar addressed to Christina Kline. Not surprisingly, it was from Brenda. At least Cormac had addressed his package to Tina Andrews.

"Looks like it," I agreed. "Cormac sent that primer he told me about."

"Yeah?" She looked curiously at the items on the bar, but I didn't offer to show them to her. I might not consider myself Tremere, but I knew better than to share their secrets.

"Do you mind if I go upstairs and check this out?" I asked softly as I put everything back in the box.

She shrugged. "Not at all."

I nodded thankfully. "I'll be back down before the boys get home." Without waiting for a reply I went upstairs to my room. Making sure the door was closed I turned on the television and put the tape into the VCR before sitting down on the edge of the bed to watch the tape in silence.

The first scene was of Christina standing with the man I knew as Antonio Moreno at the top of a stone stairway. Her dress was beautiful; neither the pictures I'd seen nor the vision that Brenda had showed me had done it justice. When the wedding march began to play, they started down the stairs arm in arm. She looked nervous but happy, and Antonio looked very much the father as he patted her hand comfortingly.

The camera followed them out into the garden where Christina's family and friends waited. I recognized everyone gathered from the photo album I had, but most of their faces didn't mean anything more than names to me. Jason stood nervously near a fountain with Brother Stephen Brennan, Cormac's nephew. Antonio led the bride to them and placed her hand in Jason's. From what Jason had told me Stephen and at least one of the guests were werewolves. Most of the rest of the people gathered were either Kindred or ghoul.

The ceremony was beautiful, if a little unorthodox. I watched as Stephen put his hand over Christina and Jason's joined hands. "By the power vested in me by the almighty," he said solemnly, "I join you in Holy Matrimony. Let no one come between you for all eternity. *In nomine patris, et filii, et spiritu sanctu. Amen.*"

Tears filled my eyes as I watched the couple kiss on the screen. Something or someone had ended the happiness of that day and I wasn't sure how to make things right again, or if I even wanted to. In my head I knew that I was Christina Kline and that I really was married to Jason, but I didn't feel that way in my heart. I couldn't deny that I felt something for him, but was it the overwhelming love he'd so obviously shared with Christina on their wedding day?

The two people who'd gotten married that day had been so happy, and I didn't understand how things could have gone so wrong in only a year. Blood tears overflowed my eyes and ran in crimson streaks down my cheeks. I wiped them away before they could fall on my clothes, but I couldn't stop them from coming.

It took me a long moment to get a hold of myself after I stopped the tape, but once I did I turned to the letter that was in my handwriting, the one Christina had written to Cormac from Moscow.

Cormac.

I'm sure by now you have heard that I disappeared from the Bathori Mansion a few nights ago. I would have left word about why I was leaving, but unfortunately, there wasn't time. I've sent a letter to Jason, but I tried to keep light about the whole situation so he wouldn't worry.

Malcolm sent three of his cronies to me at the Bathori Mansion. They were changelings, and they convinced me that only I could help Malcolm. They gave me one minute to gather my things, and I felt it was a little more important to take supplies with me than to leave a note.

I went with the damned faeries thinking they would take me right to Malcolm, but the bastards dumped me in some remote corner of Eastern Russia. I managed to find someone to bring me to Moscow, and he has promised to continue to help me find Malcolm.

Malcolm has been captured by someone or something. I'm not sure what. I believe that his capture is directly related to the loss of power that Summer told me about. The day it happened I had a series of dreams about Malcolm, and magic, dreams so strong and real that they had to have been memories of my past.

I know that I'm not Verbena anymore, and that I can never access the magic I once used, but I feel a great responsibility to help return that magic to my former tradition mates. If Malcolm truly is one of the Trimurtine as I believe he is, I have to free him, 'save his soul,' as the faeries that came for me claimed only I could do.

I've enlisted the help of a local man to get to Pechora, where I believe Malcolm is being held. Petor will help me get there, but you and I both know there is a good chance we won't be returning from this mission. Malcolm has fucked with those who care for me more than once in the past, and this may be an elaborate trap set just to draw me out. I may have remembered how close we were once, but I can't forget the evil he has done.

Malcolm stabbed me once a long time ago. He killed the first boy I loved. He captured Jason and aided in his forced embrace, then kidnapped Lena and kept her in the Monastery for months. I won't forget that, any of it. I know I can't trust him, but I can't deny that he is tied to Summer's magic. I have to help them. I turned my back on the Verbena magic once, and I can't bring myself to do it again, even if the cost is my life. Don't get me wrong, I have no desire to meet final death, but I have to do everything I can to help.

And so I have to ask a favor of you, brother, actually two favors. One, please tell Summer that I am trying to help the Verbena recover their magic. I will do whatever I have to, and I will not give up until Malcolm's soul is safe and their magic is restored. If I don't return, tell her where I have gone. She knew more than she was saying about each part of the Trimurtive 'making way' for the next. I'm sure of it. Maybe with her knowledge someone else can succeed in freeing Malcolm if I fail.

Second, I need you to look after Jason. He'll want to come after me, and that would be bad. He has no control when it comes to Lord Chaos, only hatred and vengeance. If Jason followed me he would only kill Malcolm and endanger everything I'm trying to save.

Don't get me wrong, if I can I intend to kill Malcolm myself. I just want to be sure that I won't be destroying the Verbena magic when I do it, and I don't want Jason to interfere.

If I don't make it back, Cormac, I want to thank you for everything you've done for me. Thank you for being a part of my life.

Your Sister,

Christina Kline

I was a bit surprised at the letter. Not that it spelled out Christina's reasons for leaving Salem alone, but that she'd chosen not to take Jason because he'd have put her task at risk. She'd known he would have tried to kill Malcolm, so she'd chosen not to take him with me.

It was funny how Christina's point of view had differed so much from those of Brenda and Jason. They seemed to believe that she had needed their help to accomplish anything, while she had apparently believed they would hinder what she felt she needed to do. Regardless, from what

Cormac had told me the Verbena magic was returning. Christina had succeeded in her noble cause, alone and aided only by Petor.

Apparently they were right about one thing, however. Malcolm—the Crone, Lord Chaos, whatever name he went by—was not to be trusted. Perhaps he had sent me to Detroit with amnesia in order to protect himself. Until I regained more of my memory, there was no way to find out for sure.

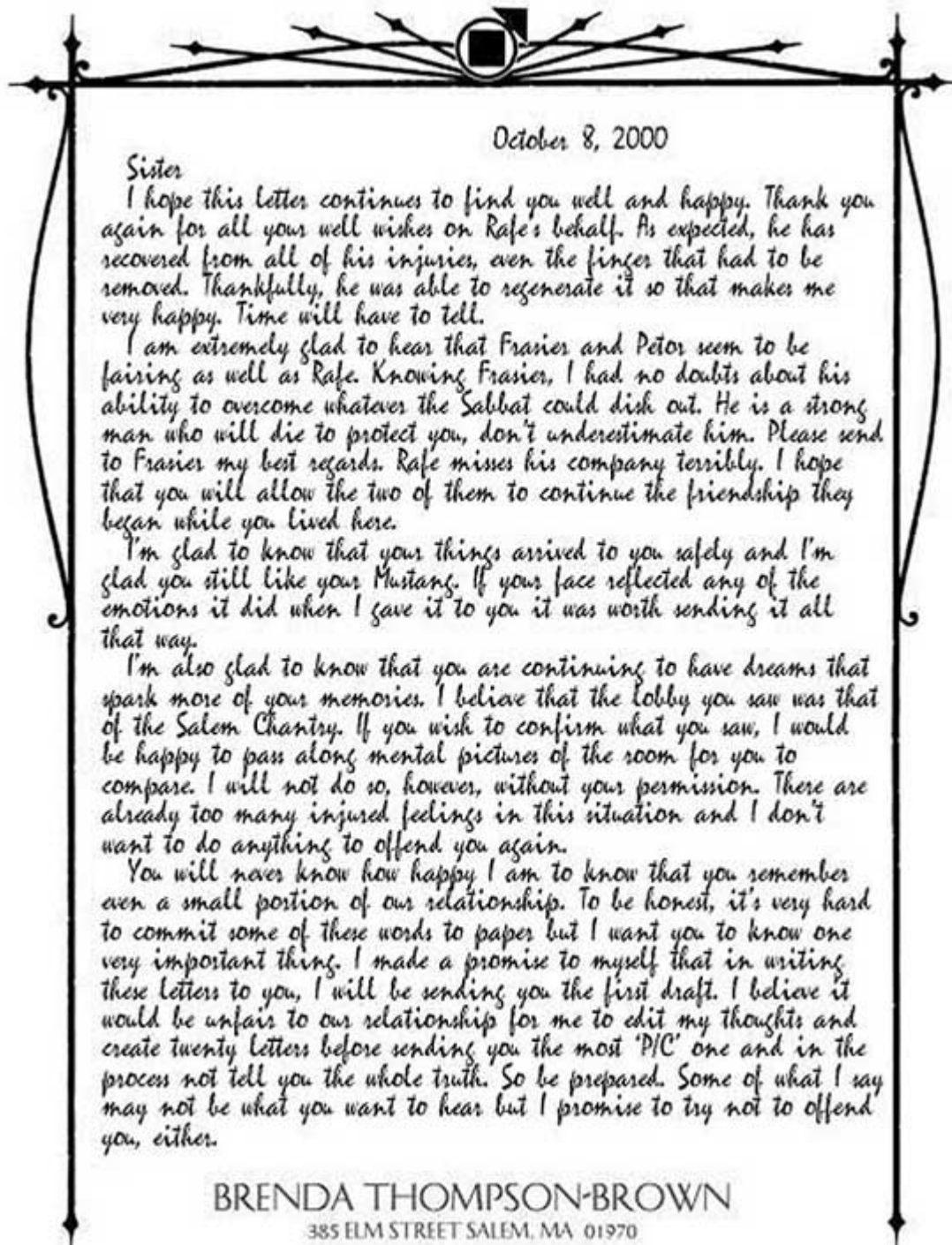
Putting those issues aside for now, I picked up the final letter that Cormac had sent. There were only two paragraphs that referred to a girl who must have been me.

Friend Gami,  
I want to thank you once again for your hospitality. Alisana is a wonderful woman and I'm sure the two of you will be very happy together. I'm glad you enjoyed the books I brought with me, and hope that they will help in the herbalist portion of your research.  
As we discussed when I visited, Meerlinda has once more approached me on the subject of the girl in California who shows such promise. Apparently her father is a member of one of the hunter groups I told you about, and she feels it best that the girl forget her mortal life completely. I expressed my concerns about my childer regaining their memories through love, but she assures me that the only person the girl ever loved enough to be a danger was a brother killed several years ago.  
Because of my experience with Cormac, I told Meerlinda that I wasn't ready to take on the responsibilities of another childe. It tears at me to know that I not only ended Cormac's mortal life, but that I completely erased it from his mind. Meerlinda has made arrangements for the girl to be adopted by a clan member who has recently asked about siring a childe. I am to travel to the city of Las Vegas next month to perform the deed. While I am in the city, I will check the chantry there for the volume we spoke of when I visited.  
Please give my regards to your wife. I don't have to tell you how lucky you are to have her.  
Your friend,  
Dougal Galloway

I sat staring down at the letter trying to process the words before me. I had no idea who Meerlinda was, but she sounded like someone Dougal respected, possibly even someone important in the Tremere clan. Of course I didn't remember, and might never remember, so I pushed my curiosity about the letter to the back of my mind and picked up the primer that Cormac had sent.

After reading the information, I tried a ritual called 'Incantation of the Shepherd'. I followed the steps he had given me to the letter then I picked up the marble and held it to my eye. Whispering the Latin phrases Cormac had given me, I concentrated on my ghouls. After a moment I felt I could point in the direction they were right at that moment, even tell their approximate distance from me. Now it made sense that Brenda had been able to pinpoint Rafe's location and lead us to him without hesitation.

I tried another ritual as well, but this one didn't work. Reminding myself that Cormac had warned me not to push it, I turned to the letter from Brenda. I'd saved it for last not knowing how she would have received the note that I'd sent her. In retrospect, I suppose I'd been a bit harsh on some things, but I'd also done my best to be pleasant and open to her.





That said I would like to give you a small chuckle by saying thank you. By being involved with you getting your memories back it has given me the opportunity to relive what you are remembering in my own head. The night you arrived in Salem is one of the happiest nights of my life and to think about it again has helped me to realize how dear you are to me. The house seems so empty with only Rafe and I here now. I remember how many times you and I laughed and fought together inside these walls and I wonder if I will ever get you back.

Sorry. I crossed the line I fought so hard in my head to establish and I'll try not to let it happen again.

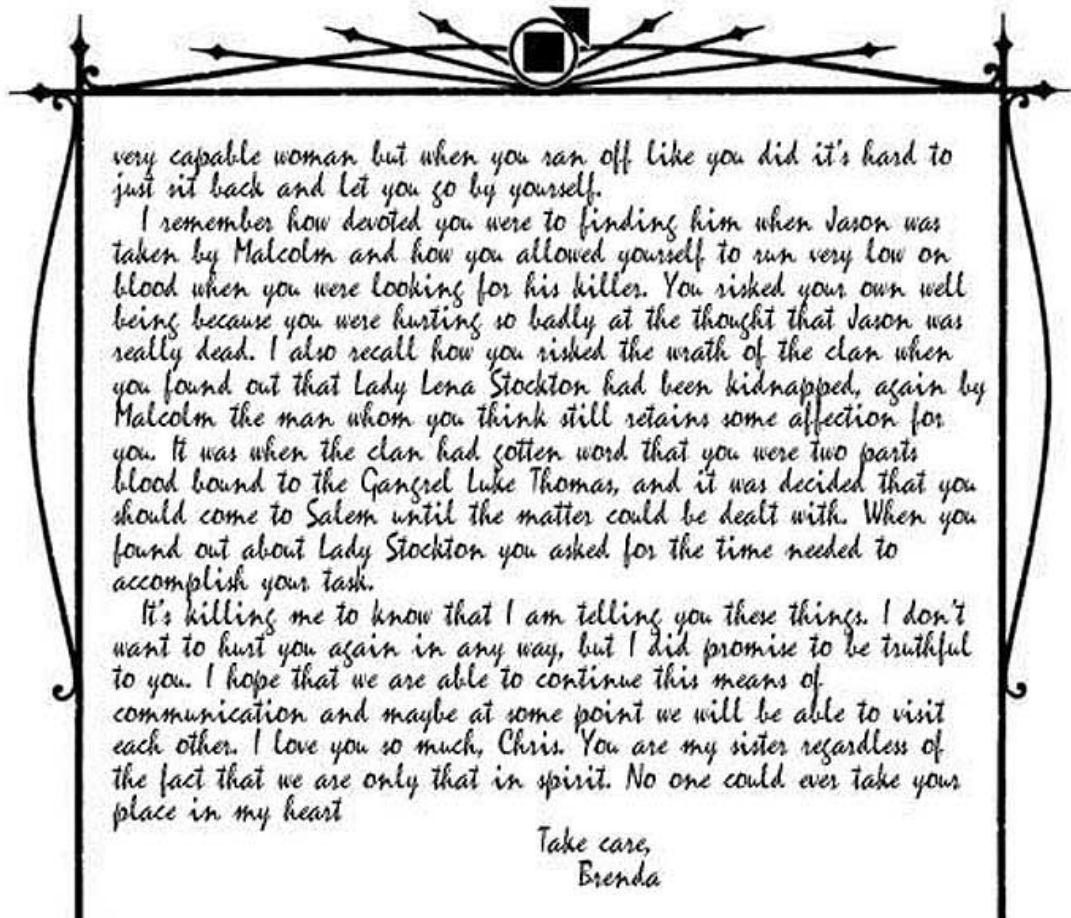
Please allow me to extend to you again any aid I can give in helping you understand any questions you have on anything. I may not be able to answer your questions, but maybe I can point a finger in the right direction. I want you to know that I am really trying to understand and except the fact that you wish to remain in Detroit. I know you feel safe there but I feel so far removed from the situation that it's been hard to regain my bearings since I've been back. I believe that it's my turn to say that I hope this doesn't offend you but know that I am trying very hard to come to terms with all of this.

As to your questions, I'm afraid that I really don't have any answers about the circumstances involving you and Antonio. That was many years before I was introduced to our current way of life and I have never had a chance to talk to our sire about it. I will pass along, however, your question to Antonio and I'm sure he will be able to enlighten you. He has been waiting for the proper time to contact you so I am sure he will respond quickly.

As far as your second question goes, I want you to know first off that I am not pointing fingers of blame in your direction with what I am about to tell you. Early on in your letter you said that you thought much of what I said that last night in Detroit had been building up inside for some time. To an extent this is true, but my frustration stems from worry over your safety and nothing else. You have been known to go off, doing what you thought was right, and for someone who loves you it's a hard way of life to deal with. You are a

BRENDA THOMPSON-BROWN

385 ELM STREET SALEM, MA 01970



Midway through reading the letter I found tears on my cheeks. Now more than ever I understood why she had been so adamant that I return to the Tremere fold. Once I was done, I folded the letter and put it aside. Brenda had confirmed that the clan had decided Christina would move to Salem because of her blood bond to Luke. It sounded like no matter how hard she tried to do the right thing, the clan kept beating her down. I was more than happy to be out of that situation. Now if I could just convince everyone else I was happy in Detroit.

## *Decisions to Make*

ONLY I CAN CHANGE MY LIFE. NO ONE CAN DO IT FOR ME.

-- CAROL BURNETT

One night Madelynne and I had a conversation about Jason and Scott. She seemed to understand my confusion, but of course she thought that Scott was a better choice between the two men. She reminded me of what Frasier had said about Jason's willingness to hurt my ghouls in order to get me out of Detroit.

"Carrying on with both of them might cause problems in the pack," she pointed out, "given what Jason did to the pack and that Scott is Logan's child."

I looked away, ashamed that I hadn't even considered that my dating Jason could cause tension in the pack.

"I can't tell you who you should be with, Tina, but I have to say that I think Scott is much better for you," she told me. "He lets you be who you are now; he doesn't want to turn you back into someone you were before."

"Yes, that's very true," I admitted. "But there's just something about Jason..."

"You're sleeping with Scott too," she reminded me. "He seems to be pretty happy with you, which I have to say I'm happy about. What about him?"

"I know he cares about me, Madelynne," I told her. "He's nice, and he actually seems to trust me. I know he'll protect the boys and me, and he's dependable." Scott was there for me too, almost every night, a part of my new family. This family accepted Petor and me as we were. I knew that while Christina's family accepted Frasier, they'd never rest until Christina was back and Petor was out of the picture.

"He makes me feel safe," I continued. "And I care about him, I do, but with Jason it's different. I don't know how to describe it."

"He's Gangrel like the rest of us," she said coolly, "nothing more."

"Yes and no," I told her. "It's more than that."

She shook her head. "I don't see it."

"You're not sleeping with him," I said bluntly. "And it's not just sex, that's just one example."

"Like what?"

"I don't know, just the way he makes me feel." I didn't know how to describe it, I just knew I liked the way he made me feel when he wasn't trying to change me into the woman who used to be his wife, when I wasn't overcome with guilt for sleeping with him to begin with. "It's like I'm the only woman in the whole world, like when I'm with him he's the only man in the whole world."

"And Scott doesn't make you feel that way at all?" she asked.

Her question made me squirm. I didn't like comparing the two men. "When Jason's not here I can pretend that I didn't have a life before this," I told her honestly. "It's not that it's bad with Scott, it's very good, but it's not the same."

"Then is it better or worse?" she challenged. "And you can't tell that it's just different either."

"I wouldn't say that being with Scott is better or worse, Madelynne." I fumbled for an explanation, but how I felt was difficult to put into words. "Look, I know that you'd rather see me with Scott, and believe me I'd rather have that too, it's less complicated, but I can't ignore the



fact that Chris—" I stopped myself from saying her name. I was Christina Kline, and I had to get used to that fact. "I used to love him."

"Used to love him," she emphasized, "not love him now. There is a key word there. Do you truly love either one of them now?"

I could remember quite clearly the love I had once felt for Jason, and I was definitely drawn to him, but I didn't think I could say that I still loved him. I cared a great deal for Scott, but didn't think I could call that love either. "I can't honestly say that," I said at last.

"Then here is my opinion," she told me. "I think that you need to choose just one of them to be with, because right now you're not being fair to either of them. Take a moment to think about how they feel knowing that when you're not with one of them you are with the other. How would you feel if you remembered and one of them didn't?"

Her word made me burn with shame. "I know it's bad. What's worse is Jason doesn't know."

"Maybe he should," she said softly. "Do you think that you can choose between them, either one or the other?"

I'd known all along that it would come down to a choice between them, but I still wasn't prepared for to make the decision. I couldn't imagine not seeing Jason, but then again I couldn't imagine not having Scott's strength to lean on. "I-It's just-this is so hard for me!" I exclaimed. "And I get sick of saying that, believe me. I'm tired of being the poor little girl who lost her memory, but every scrap I get back just confuses me more. Part of me just wants it all to go away, and with Scott it does, but being around Jason makes me want Christina's life back."

"You can't have it all," she reminded me. "It would be too hard to even try. A person cannot live two lives."

I closed my eyes with a sigh. "I know. It's just that I feel like I don't even have one," I told her, looking at her hoping that she would understand. "Or that I do have two, and they're completely separate."

"That's just it," she said strongly. "You do have two completely separate lives. Now here is yet another decision to make. Which kind of life you really want to lead? Do you want to make a new one the way you want it or go back to the old life that Christina had with someone looking down your back every five minutes? Near freedom or none? It's all up to you."

Put that way it wasn't much of a question. I couldn't see myself living the way they claimed I had been happy living.

"You know in a way it's not fair to you either," she added softly.

I looked at her in surprise. "What do you mean?"

"This entire situation is pulling you in so many different directions," she explained sympathetically. "You are happy with both men in different ways, and you want your freedom to do what you want but those people from Salem don't seem to want you to. Then you have issues with Frasier, you're starting a new business here and maybe a new life if you don't return to Salem."

"I don't want to go back to Salem, Madelynne," I told her honestly, "that's part of what's making this so hard. I don't want to be the good little Tremere who lives where she's told and dumps men they think are no good for her. I like it here, I like being a part of the pack, I like the freedom and the security I have here."

But there was more to it that I didn't want to admit. I wanted to belong with the pack, but I wanted to be with Jason too. And we were married after all; didn't that mean we belonged together?

"What?" Madelynne prompted. "Finish what you were saying; it didn't sound like you were really done."

I looked down away from her discerning gaze. "I didn't want to believe it when they told me who I was," I reminded her. "I didn't want to be Christina Kline, but I can't deny that I am her."

"So you are," she agreed, "but you are also Tina Andrews, and those two women lead very different lives."

She was right, and I knew better than to think I could keep living like this. "You know, there are two things I'm afraid of, Madelynne," I admitted softly. "The first is that I will get my memory back and realize I don't belong here, that I was only fooling myself into believing that I belonged with you, with the pack. The second is that I will somehow end up back in the Tremere fold with my memory, and realize that I could never be happy there, that this was my home and I gave it up."

"There are a lot of 'what if's in life," she said sagely. "We all make bad choices in life and have to live with them. It's hard to find the right choice and make the perfect decision because we are all human, but either way you have to choose. You have to decide what you think is best for you and do it. No looking back, no second-guessing. Make a choice and live with it."

I looked up at her and couldn't stop the tears that filled my eyes. "I don't know what's best for me," I told her honestly. "According to Brenda, I never did. What if I dump Jason and remember later that I really did love him? What if I stop seeing Scott only to realize that it was him I loved? What if I do the wrong thing with Frasier and he takes off where I can't protect him? Madelynne, if I make the wrong choices I'm screwed. I don't know what to do."

"Either way a choice has to be made, and quickly," she said firmly. "Don't let the stupid witch get to you. She is just saying things in anger to get to you and make you think that you need her to make the choice for you."

I could tell that she was getting mad and I couldn't handle it. Madelynne was my friend, sometimes I felt like she was my only friend. If she told me to leave I didn't know what I would do. I couldn't go back to Salem and risk Petor's safety. If I had to leave the pack I had nowhere to go. I broke down crying, leaning on Madelynne's shoulder while she soothed me as best she could. It took some time for me to get control of myself and when I finally did she handed me a tissue to wipe my face.

"Maybe you should forget about all this for a while," she suggested. "Maybe see Jason another time and take some time to think about this."

I shrugged and looked away. "I just-I think we all need to know if the pack can trust him. We'll never know if he stays away."

"Trust is something that is earned and he will have to work damn hard to get that from us," she reminded me. "Ralph might come looking for him when he hears he's back in town." At the Gangrel Primogen's name, her tone grew angry, almost bitter.

"He'll never prove himself if he doesn't come here, you know that," I replied. "And if he proves we can't trust him then we'll have to deal with it, won't we?" No matter what Christina had felt for him, I wouldn't allow him to put the pack in danger.

"I guess so," she murmured reluctantly.

"So it's okay for me to ask him to come to Detroit?" I queried hopefully.

"Like I said, it's not my city," she told me. "He can go where he wants."

I nodded. "I know it will be hard having him here, and that Scott is going to have the worst time of it. Do you think it's selfish of me to want to try this?"

She looked away. "I really don't know how to answer that."

I looked down at my hands. "It is selfish of me, isn't it?"

"I don't know," she soothed. "It would hurt Scott but he does know more than Jason. I really think a decision should be made after he comes here, if he'll come."

"I know, you're right," I agreed. "I just hope I can make the right one."

"You will, don't worry," she assured me.

"I worry," I countered. "What if I fuck things up like I did in Russia? I could end up worse off then when I started."

"What?" she gasped. Her anger took off like a rocket. "Who said you fucked things up in Russia? You don't even remember. Here's a thought, quit listening to Brenda! You don't know what happened there and neither does anyone else that you know. Make a choice live with it. We all do."

"I'm not listening to Brenda, okay?" I shot back irritably. "But if I didn't fuck things up, then why did I end up with amnesia? If I'd done things right, Chaos would be dead and I'd know who the fuck I am."

"Whatever," she growled. "Do you even know why you were there? Hmm probably not, right? Things happen for a reason, this is your chance to start again and do it your way. Forget about all the 'what if's or 'if I'd done things right'. Maybe just maybe you did do things right!" she exclaimed. "Did you ever stop to think about it that way?"

Her raised voice cut me to the bone, but as I thought about what she said I realized she was right and I had to laugh at myself. "I'm whining, aren't I?" I asked her. "You're right. I have to stop thinking about what I might have done right or wrong and concentrate on what I can do now."

"I think you got it," she told me with a smile. "Live for the now and the future, not the past, because it is the past and you cannot change it. What's done is done." She laid a hand over mine. "You can't take it back and if you could life would be too damn easy. And yes you are whining," she added with a grin.

"Okay, so I just have to deal with picking which guy I want to be with the most," I murmured. Then I groaned in frustration. "Can't I go back to whining?"

"Absolutely no whining at all," she declared. "And choose one."

"After Jason visits," I agreed. "And I have to tell Scott what's up."

"You should tell them both," she reminded me.

I bit at my lower lip nervously. "I haven't told Jason about Scott. Are you sure I should?"

"Tell him about Scott, it's only fair," she insisted. "Then tell him about choosing. It's best to be open and honest; it turns out best in the end."

I gave her a wry smile. "Yeah, you can say that, you're not in my shoes."

*I looked up into the mirror and saw Brenda standing behind me, my wedding dress in her hands. She smiled fondly and stepped toward me.*

*"It's time," she said softly.*

*Nodding, I turned and she helped me step into the bundle of sequins, lace and silk. "Do you think he'll like it?" I asked timidly.*

*She grinned. "I think he'll hate having to help you out of it."*

*I heard soft laughter from the other girls, and bent my head to hide the anticipation I felt.*

I woke from a dream of Salem with tears on my cheeks. Thankfully Scott was already gotten up so I didn't have to try and hide them from him. The girl I remembered being had loved Jason so much that it hurt just thinking about the relationship they'd lost.

While I knew that I didn't love Jason as Christina had, deep down I wondered if Jason really loved Christina. He'd only come to Michigan twice since she had disappeared, and had immediately ghouled a woman he refused to tell me much of anything about.

If he did love her, wouldn't he be trying harder to win her—win me back? Shouldn't he be camped out on my doorstep, making sure that he was foremost in my mind, reminding me of what we had shared before I'd gone off on my noble cause?

And if Christina really had loved him as much as I remembered, why did I feel so guilty every time I slept with Jason? I wasn't sure if it was because I felt like I was sleeping with another woman's husband, or because I was sleeping around on Scott.

Even if Jason had loved the woman I used to be, he'd been a prick when he'd first come to Detroit. Granted, most of his behavior can be explained by the fact that his wife had gone missing. Though I had remembered our wedding, remembered loving him, I couldn't honestly say I was in love with him now. And even if I was, who's to say I wouldn't fall in love with Scott given enough time?

I didn't need Madelynne to tell me that I needed to make a choice between them, and soon. The problem was that it wasn't an easy subject to settle in my mind. Jason claimed to love me, but I knew that if he loved anyone it was Christina and not me. Scott had never claimed to love me, but in his arms I found an acceptance that Jason could never offer.

I'd told Madelynne the truth; there were times that I felt as if I were two different people. Most of the time I was Tina Andrews, the Caitiff who lived at the pub with Scott and the rest of the pack, but on the nights I was with Jason, I was Christina Kline, the Tremere who had married him, loved him.

The thing I really felt bad about was the fact that whether or not I told Scott what happened when I was alone with Jason, deep down he knew I was sleeping with another man. Jason had no idea that he had any competition at all, let alone that I spent more time in Scott's bed than his. I knew I couldn't go on that way. I had to make a choice between them and I had to do it soon. At the very least, I had to tell Jason about Scott. I wasn't looking forward to his reaction.

Madelynne had been right about my relationship with Jason affecting the pack, and specifically Scott. I knew he wasn't happy that I was continuing to see Jason. He still came to the pub just as often, but he was more tense than he had been when I'd first come to Detroit. We still went on dates, although he talked a lot less than before, which was really saying something since he didn't talk much to begin with.

Scott never said a word about what I did with Jason, which only made me feel guiltier. He never even asked if I'd slept with Christina's husband, although sometimes it seemed like he was the only one who didn't. Still, as time went on Scott grew more and more sensitive to the subject to the point where he began growling every time Jason's name was mentioned, and even sometimes when it was carefully avoided.

I tried not to talk about Jason or anything to do with him, including the past I didn't remember. I also avoided talking about the future or the choice I knew I had to make. Scott noticed, of course, and eventually he asked me what was wrong.

I shrugged, hoping to hide my concerns. "Nothing really, just lots to think about." The look he gave me told me he didn't believe me so I told him part of the truth. "This thing with Frasier has really been bothering me," I admitted. "He's always there, it's like he's obsessed with me."

"Isn't that normal?" he asked.

"How am I supposed to know?" I asked with a smile. "Amnesia, remember? Petor's not like that."

"Maybe you should stop ghouling men," he suggested. I could hear the amusement in his voice. It was as close to a joke as I'd ever heard him make.

"It's a little late for that now, don't you think?" I asked teasingly. "Next time I'll be sure to ask your advice before I feed someone my blood."

"Isn't your life fucked up enough as is with out bringing any more blood bonds into it?" he drawled.

The smile left my face at the reminder of all the things I was supposed to be thinking about. "Yes, it most definitely is." I added under my breath, "And that's going to change."

When his hands dropped away I knew that he'd heard me. "Who is the change going to start with?" he asked guardedly.

I turned to give him a level look. "Me." It was the truth, after all. I had to stop wavering and make a decision about my future. Like a coward I pushed those thoughts away and moved back into Scott's arms, back where the past couldn't touch me. His arms closed around me and I knew that no matter what happened he would keep me safe.

As time went on I realized that safe wasn't all I wanted from Scott. I wanted more from him than the casual relationship we seemed to be sharing. He slept most days at the pub with me, and sometimes I stayed with him, but there were times that he went home to his apartment alone. While he worked at the same factory my boys did, he'd developed an interest in the security agency I was trying to put together, and was more than willing to lend a hand or ideas to help us out.

I knew I couldn't push him, but I missed him when we didn't stay together, missed more than just the sex we shared. I missed his arms around me and knowing that he would hold me throughout the day. Not that the sex wasn't good. Well, actually it wasn't. It was exceptional, and only seemed to get better as time went on.

# Stand by Me

ALL OF THE THINGS THAT HAVE HAPPENED

I'M SURELY TO BLAME

DROWNING POOL - REMINDED

*"What are you looking for?" Jason asked.*

*"You." I brushed my tears away and looked around for him. I didn't see him anywhere.*

*"Why are you crying?" he asked me almost gently.*

*From the corner of my eye, I saw that the limousine had pulled over and stopped. I held out a hand toward the vehicle to stop people I couldn't see but somehow knew were there. "Stay back," I said firmly, then to Jason I asked, "Don't you know?"*

*"Someone told you to look for me," Jason said.*

*I chuckled softly, affection warming my voice as I replied; "Do you think I always do what someone tells me to?"*

*"If persuaded to in the right way," he told me. I still couldn't see him, but the voice was coming from directly in front of me.*

*"No one told me to look for you. I just needed to find you." His behavior confused me. Why was he being so cold?*

*"Well, you did, and now it's over," he said, his voice like ice.*

*My emotions began to overwhelm me, and I swayed on my feet, tears staining my cheeks. "It's over?" I demanded. "Do you have any idea what I went through looking for you?"*

Once more I woke alone with blood tears on my pillow. I felt as if only a night had passed since Jason had left me on the street I remembered in my dream instead of the years that I'd been told had gone by since it had really happened. I tried to tell myself what I'd felt in the dream didn't matter, but my heart ached just the same. Why had I wanted Jason so badly that even now the pain of our long ago parting could bring me wake up crying?

I was not going to find the answers I wanted so desperately in my memory. If I wanted to learn more about my love for Jason I'd simply have to spend more time with him, but at that very moment the hurt I felt was too fresh, too raw for me to even consider talking to him.

Pushing the memories as far to the back of my mind as I could, I dressed and went downstairs. The boys had the night off and they were waiting for me at the bar. Carissa was serving them burgers and fries as I joined them, but she moved away to answer the phone before I could greet her.

*"What did you boys do today?" I asked.*

*"We visited the zoo," Frasier said between bites of food.*

*"The Zombie Zoo?" I asked warily. I knew that it was a hang out for ghouls, but I wasn't sure I liked them going there. Alex had told me things could get rough there, and while I knew they could take care of themselves, I didn't want them getting hurt.*

*"The Detroit Zoo," Petor explained. "I wanted to see what an American zoo looked like, and Frasier said he'd never been to one here."*

Before I could question them about their visit, Carissa called to me from the end of the bar. *"It's for you," she told me.*

A little confused, I walked down to the phone. No one ever called me on the bar phone, everyone I dealt with seemed to know my cell phone number. With no little trepidation I took the receiver from her. "Hello?"

"Mis-ah, hello. My name is Andrea White and I realize that you don't know who I am, but I've come here from Las Vegas to deliver a letter to you," a cultured voice informed me.

"From whom?"

"My employer, Antonio Moreno," she replied. "I wanted to make sure it was all right for me to come to the Pub and deliver it."

I glanced around and saw that none of the other pack members were in the bar. Of course it was shortly after sundown, and only Logan, Madelynne and I had spent the day at the pub. The others would probably be in within an hour or so if they followed their usual routine.

"That will be fine," I assured her. "Can you come by in about an hour and a half?"

"Would eight o'clock be all right?"

"Yes. I'll be waiting."

"Thank you," she told me. "I look forward to meeting you."

"We haven't met before?" I asked.

"No, I have only recently been... hired by Senor Moreno," she explained.

"Oh." I wasn't sure what else to say. "I'll see you then."

"Goodbye."

I hung up the phone and went to tell Madelynne that we'd be having company.

At precisely eight o'clock the front door opened and a tall thin woman walked in. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail at the nape of her neck and she wore a casual yet expensive suit. Her eyes took in the customers that half filled the bar, lingered briefly at the pool table where Alex and Scott were playing, and flitted past Madelynne and Logan at the bar before stopping at my face. With a smile of greeting, she walked toward me.

I met her half way across the room and gestured toward an empty booth along the wall. Without a word she sat down and watched as I settled across from her.

"Miss White, I presume," I said in greeting.

"Andrea, please," she told me. "I'm afraid I'm not sure what to call you."

"Tina is fine," I replied. "You said you have something for me?"

"I do." She reached into the bag she was carrying and took out a manila envelope. "Senor Moreno has asked me to deliver this letter to you in person. He didn't trust it to the postal service."

"I understand," I said as I took it from her. I looked down at the obvious male handwriting across the envelope. *Christina Kline*, it read simply. I winced at the use of the name, but a part of me understood why he'd chosen to use it.

"I have been instructed to wait if you would like to draft a reply," she offered.

I nodded absently, then glanced around and signaled for Frasier to come over. "Frasier, could you escort Miss White to the bar and see that she gets a drink or some food if she would like?" When he nodded, I added, "And could you bring me a notepad and pen?"

"Sure," he replied, standing back to give Andrea room to stand. His eyes ran across her lithe frame in appreciation as he offered her his arm. I couldn't bring myself to feel jealous at the attention he was paying her; at least he wasn't coming on to me yet again.

I turned to the envelope and slowly opened the flap. Inside was two pieces of Tremere letterhead covered with the same handwriting that had been on the outside of the envelope. I could almost hear Antonio's deep soothing voice as I began to read.

OCTOBER 13, 2000

CHRISTINA-


GREETINGS, MY DEAR. I SPOKE WITH BRENDA AND SHE TOLD ME OF YOUR QUESTIONS INVOLVING HOW YOU CAME TO BE WITH ME. I MUST SAY THAT IT IS ODD FOR ME TO ADDRESS THE TOPIC. I REMEMBER HOW CONFUSED AND DISTRAUGHT YOU WERE DURING THE EARLY DAYS OF YOUR EMBRACE AND IT GIVES ME GREAT SADNESS TO KNOW THAT YOU MUST EXPERIENCE THESE SAME THINGS ALL OVER AGAIN.

TO PUT IT SIMPLY I FOUND YOU ON THE STREETS OF LAS VEGAS. I WAS STEPPING OUT ONE EVENING WITH IDELLA AND AS WE WERE MAKING OUR WAY INSIDE THE PARIS HOTEL, I FELT YOU ACROSS THE STREET. OF COURSE I DID NOT KNOW IT WAS YOU, I JUST FELT THE PRESENCE OF ANOTHER OF OUR KIND. WHEN I TURNED TO SEE WHO IT WAS, I SAW YOU STANDING THERE, LOOKING SO LOST AND SCARED. I HAD NO IDEA WHO YOU WERE BUT I HAD AN IDEA THAT YOU DID NOT KNOW YET WHAT YOU WERE. I WENT INSIDE THE HOTEL WITH IDELLA LONG ENOUGH TO SEE THAT SHE WAS SETTLED AND TOLD HER THAT I WAS GOING TO LOOK FOR YOU.

I FOUND YOU AT A STREET SIDE EATERY A FEW MINUTES LATER AND MY SUSPICIONS THAT YOU DID NOT KNOW THAT YOU WERE KINDRED WERE CONFIRMED. YOU WERE ATTEMPTING TO EAT FOOD AND WHEN IT MADE YOU SICK, I WATCHED AS YOU THREW UP IN A TRASHCAN THEN RAN IN CONFUSION. I TRIED TO SPEAK WITH YOU MANY TIMES BUT YOU RAN AWAY SO I DECIDED TO MAKE SOME INQUIRIES OF MY OWN TO SEE IF ANYONE ELSE KNEW WHO YOU WERE.

IT WAS LATELY THAT MORNING THAT I HEARD ABOUT THE DEAD WOMAN THAT HAD BEEN FOUND IN AN ALLEY AND I KNEW THAT YOU





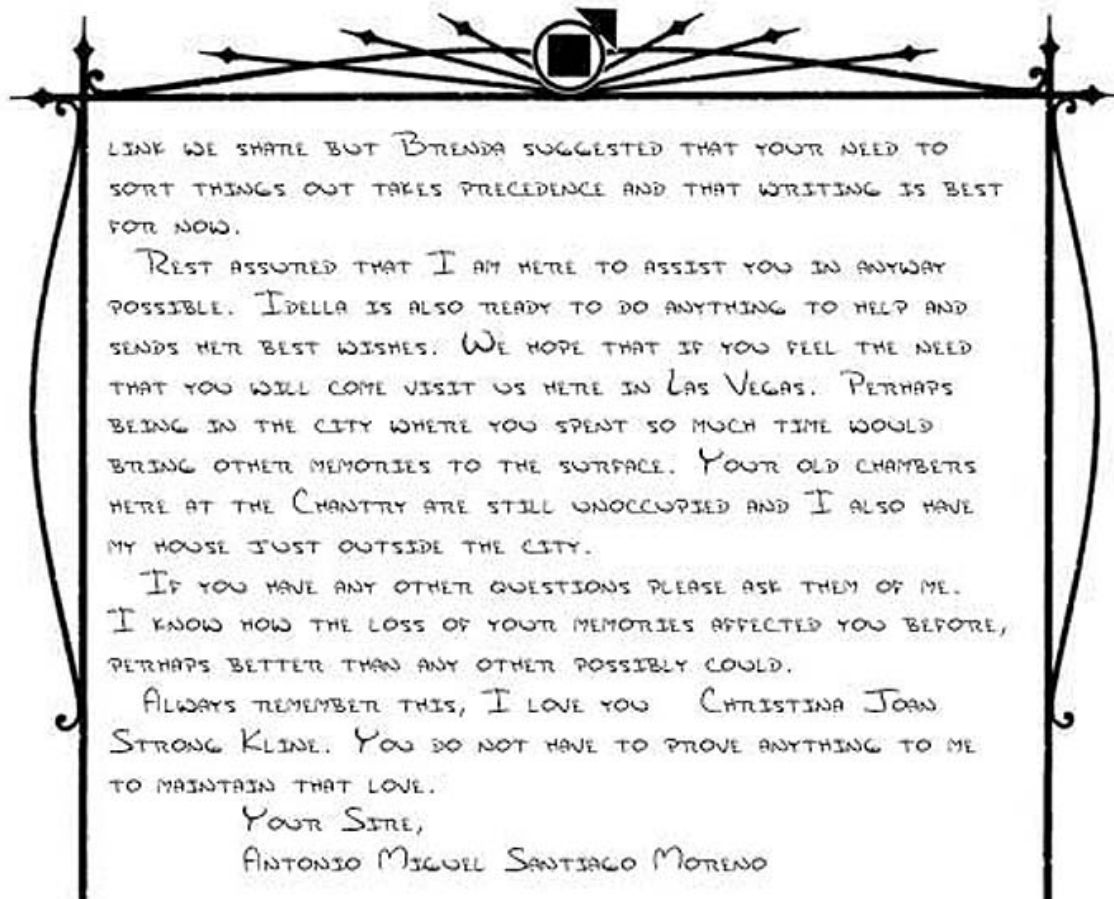
WERE RESPONSIBLE. AN URGENCY TO FIND YOU AND HELP YOU BEFORE IT WAS TOO LATE BEGAN TO DRIVE ME. THE NEXT NIGHT I SEARCHED THE ENTIRE CITY TRYING TO FIND YOU. WHEN I DID, YOU RAN AGAIN BUT I MANAGED TO CORNER YOU ON A ROOFTOP. I ADMIT THAT I HAD TO DOMINATE YOU IN ORDER TO LEARN THE DETAILS OF WHAT HAD BECOME OF YOU BUT UNFORTUNATELY YOU DID NOT REMEMBER ANYTHING. THE ONLY WAY YOU KNEW YOUR NAME WAS BECAUSE OF THE BRACELET YOU WORE.

I REMEMBER THAT YOU WERE CRYING IN CONFUSION. I PULLED OUT A HANDKERCHIEF TO WIPE YOUR FACE AND WHEN I DID I TOUCHED YOUR BLOOD AND KNEW THAT YOU WERE TREMERE. I BELIEVED AT THE TIME THAT NO ONE OF OUR CLAN WOULD LEAVE A CAITIFF TO FEND FOR THEMSELVES AND I KNEW THAT YOUR TRUE SISTER MUST BE DEAD. WITH YOUR PERMISSION I ADOPTED YOU AND THE REST AS THEY SAY, IS HISTORY.

THAT IS ALL I KNOW. I HOPE THAT WHAT I HAVE TOLD YOU SERVES AS A TRIGGER TO THE MEMORIES YOU ARE SEEKING. I WOULD LIKE TO ADD THAT BOTH IDELLA AND MYSELF ARE VERY CONCERNED ABOUT YOU AND THAT IF YOU NEED ANYTHING OF US YOU NEED ONLY TO ASK. I UNDERSTAND YOUR NEED TO SURROUND YOURSELF WITH WHAT YOU KNOW; IT IS AFTER ALL YOU HOW YOU COPE WITHOUT YOUR MEMORIES BEFORE. I JUST WISH THAT YOUR SISTER WOULD UNDERSTAND THAT AS WELL. YOU TWO HAVE ALWAYS HAD A CLOSE RELATIONSHIP REGARDLESS OF THE FACT THAT YOU HAVE NOT SPENT MUCH TIME TOGETHER. REMEMBER THAT SHE HAS YOUR BEST INTEREST AT HEART AND THAT SHE WOULD NEVER DO ANYTHING TO INTENTIONALLY HURT YOU.

I HOPE YOU DO NOT MIND THAT I HAVE SENT ONE OF MY GHOULS TO DELIVER THIS LETTER TO YOU. I DID NOT WANT TO RELY ON THE PAST FOR SOMETHING THIS IMPORTANT AND ANDREA IS BOTH DISCREET AND TRUSTWORTHY.

I MUST SAY THAT WRITING THIS IS A BIT FRUSTRATING FOR ME. I AM SO USED TO EITHER CALLING YOU OR USING THE MIND



I read the letter over once more to make sure that I hadn't missed anything. The fact that I'd killed a woman wasn't so much of a surprise as it was distressing. A new vampire unaware of what she was could inadvertently kill quite easily, but knowing that I'd done it myself made me sad. I wondered how many others I'd killed in my life as a Kindred.

Pushing down the feelings of guilt over a death I might never remember, I pulled the notepad that Frasier had brought me closer and picked up the pen. After thinking for a moment, I began to write. After two or three false starts, the words finally started coming together.

October 14, 2000

Antonio

I'm sorry you had to hear from Brenda that I had questions about our relationship. I know I should have contacted you myself, but I have found it difficult to do so for a number of reasons that I hope to explain here.

Yes, I have been confused about my memories, or lack thereof. The things that I do remember are contrary at best, and it is difficult for me to make any kind of sense or order out of them. While I've been told that this is normal, that I had the same experience when my memories first returned to me, that knowledge only goes so far. It's hard to know where I stood on things, how I felt, who I trusted.

Your description of how we met hasn't triggered any memories in the few minutes since I've read your letter, but then again fragments of the past have been surfacing during the day while I sleep. I do remember a portion of the night you found me on the rooftop, but no one has mentioned anything about a woman I'd killed. It hurts to know that I could have taken a life like that, and I hope that it was done more in ignorance of what I was than by intent.

If I never thanked you before, I'd like to take the opportunity to do so now. I know that it must have been hard for you to take on someone who didn't know anything about being one of our kind, someone that you didn't actually embrace. I hope I was able to make you proud of me, but somewhere given the stories I've heard I'm afraid all I managed to do was disappoint you. Apparently I did nothing but put those I loved in danger, but I'd like to think I

also tried to protect them as best I could.

I don't remember much about you, or really anyone for that matter. I can remember an argument that we had about a ritual. I assume the Blood Walk, that would have told who my sire really was. I was angry and felt betrayed that you hadn't told me about it. I also remember being held in some kind of cell and you saying that I was of no consequence to you. I was frightened and hungry, and when I tried to protest you got very angry.

But I remember other things as well, better things. I remember that you were worried about Brenda and me, and that you hoped we would look after each other. I can remember knowing in my heart that you hadn't embraced me but wanting so badly for it to somehow have been true. I think you felt the same way. You held me while I cried in your arms, in think in relief that the truth about my sire had finally been revealed.

I hope that you understand now why it has been so hard for me to contact you. How do I know which memories are the ones that I lived my life by? How can I trust people I barely remember to do what is best for me? I'm sure that everyone has my best interests at heart, but everything is still so confusing for me. Eventually I hope rebuild all of the relationships that I have lost, but I know that will take time. The one thing I do know is that I have to take care of myself. I need to prove both to myself and to those who care about me that I can make the right choices.

Sometimes I just want someone to take over for me, to tell me exactly what I thought and felt before I lost my memory. I wish I could simply walk into the chantry here in Detroit and be taken back into

put myself in. I know that you were like a father to me, and I hope that I will remember more of the good times we shared. I have heard Idella's name before, but I'm afraid I don't remember her. Please tell her that I am well and safe here in Detroit, and thank her also for her concern.

And I'd like to thank you for writing to me rather than initiating a mind link. I realize that it's frustrating for you, but I seem to have little control over the mind link, and I'd hate to say, or rather think, something I shouldn't. Andrea is waiting patiently at the bar for my response, so I suppose I should close and let her get on with her duties.

I look forward to hearing from you soon.  
Tina

I wondered for a moment what he would think about the name I'd chosen to sign the letter with, but I had decided long ago that until I truly remembered what it was like to be Christina Kline, I would not use that name. Folding the letter, I placed it in the envelope that Frasier had thought to bring me.

As I looked around I realized that Andrea was sitting at the bar with Frasier hanging on her every word. Rolling my eyes at his libido, I picked up my things and went to join them. Andrea saw me approach in the mirror and turned to face me.

"Thank you for waiting," I told her, handing over the letter I'd written. "I would appreciate it if you would see that Senior Moreno gets this."

"Of course, Tina," she said pleasantly, placing the envelope in her bag. "My plane leaves at one, and I will have the letter to him before dawn." She turned to my ghoul and held out her hand. "Thank you for the pleasant conversation," she told him.

He held her hand lightly in his and grinned down at her. "It was my pleasure, Andrea. Any time you want to see the city, let me know."

She smiled and said her goodbyes. A few minutes later she was gone.

## *Frasier's Concerns*

IT'S NOT THE WAY I CHOOSE TO LIVE  
AND SOMETHING SOME WHERE'S GOTTA GIVE  
O-TOWN - ALL OR NOTHING

I went behind the bar to throw away the crumpled paper that had been the first few attempts at the letter I'd written before asking Frasier to take Antonio's letter upstairs to my room.

"Everything all right?" Madelynne asked me.

"Fine," I told her, looking at the other pack members who had now joined us. "Antonio wanted to tell me about the night he found me in Las Vegas." After I relayed what had been in his letter, I shrugged. "What he told me matches what little I remember." I sat down with her and Logan at their table. "I can't believe Frasier was all over her like that."

"He's been all over everything," Madelynne pointed out.

"Yeah, I know." I was included in that mess. He hadn't tried to throw me in a corner and have his way with me, but I got the feeling that might come to that soon. "What am I gonna do about him?" I muttered.

Madelynne looked like she was going to answer me, but at that moment Carissa called her away. Logan laid his hand over mine where it lay on the table. I noticed suddenly how long and thin his fingers were, almost unnaturally so "Perhaps your Frasier is trying to get your attention on some matter. If a servant's place is not set firmly by their master, they will always test the boundaries."

I wasn't sure exactly what he meant by 'set firmly', but the only thing I could think he meant I wasn't willing to do. My face must have reflected my shock because he shook his head and added, "No, I am not suggesting you beat him down. Merely remind him of his place firmly. You are his master, not the other way around."

Both Logan and Madelynne were fully aware of what had been going on with Frasier and his behavior, they'd have to be blind not to. "I'm not sure what to do," I told Logan, "what I used to do before I lost my memory. What would you do if he was yours?"

He smiled wryly. "Well, if he were mine, we wouldn't be having this problem." His smile faded and his face grew serious once more. "But really, have you talked with him? Are his desires really that unwarranted? He spoke to me of the time you 'took him in'."

Once again I was surprised by his words, but I did my best not to show it. I knew that if Frasier felt comfortable enough to talk to Logan about his past, I'd been right to stay here with the pack. Logan and Scott could help me give my boys guidance that I couldn't be sure they'd ever had before.

"He says that Jason had abandoned you then as well," Logan continued, "and you turned to him."

Given my dream of the day before I wasn't surprised that Jason had abandoned me. "I turned to Frasier?" I asked softly. "In what way?"

"I know only what Frasier told me," he replied. "I think this is something you should ask him about."

I nodded and made a mental note to ask Frasier about the subject later.

"He said that even when Jason came back into your life, Frasier was always a part of your 'inner circle'," Logan continued. "Now, what with your memory loss, Petor, the change of city, even Scott, Frasier may be feeling left out of what was he was once such an important part of."

"I've tried really hard to keep Frasier included," I told him honestly. "I can't say what Christina did with him before or why, but I'm not about to abandon him just because I don't remember him."

"I got the impression from him that he was almost an extension of your... let us say gun arm, if only for the colorful picture it paints, in your old life," he replied. "Now things are happening, both of your choice and not, that he has had neither control over, nor any input into."

Just the fact that Frasier had talked to him about it and not me proved that Logan was right. I knew I had to have a long talk with Frasier. While I was glad he had someone to talk to, he should have come to me about how he felt.

"Or perhaps he feels his 'time' has come," Logan added.

"I know he's my responsibility," I drawled, "but that doesn't mean that I have to sleep with him. I have to admit he's attractive, but I guess I have to make it clear that's not something that's going to happen. I was hoping he'd get the hint without me spelling it out for him, but he hasn't."

He shot me an affectionate grin. "He is as headstrong as his master."

I smiled ruefully. "I hope being headstrong doesn't stop either one of us from doing the right thing."

"We all hope," he agreed, leaning across the table toward me. As he did I noticed that his eyes were not brown as I'd believed them to be, they were amber, almost yellow, like those of a gray wolf. While they were not abnormal in any other way, I knew that the color was probably not something he'd been born with. They were a frenzy mark, just like Scott and Jason's teeth.

Madelynne rejoined us with a smile toward Logan. "I hope you told her that she needed to set boundaries." When he nodded, she looked at me. "I don't think you ghoul'd him for a relationship or anything like that, and he knows that. If you want tone or anything with him then tell him, but if there isn't a chance he also needs to know that before things get out of hand and something bad happens. It could end up where he leaves you and you won't even have him as a friend or worse yet you have to tell him to go. This has to be taken care of immediately."

"I know it does," I agreed. "I'm not sure how to do it. I don't really want that kind of a relationship with him, my life is too complicated already, but I don't want to lose him either."

"Tell him that exactly," she suggested. When Logan moved off to talk to one of his friends who had come in, she leaned close to me. "Have you decided what you're going to do about Scott and Jason?"

I shook my head. "I'm going to meet Jason in Flint in a few days. I'm going to tell him about Scott and ask him to come to Detroit."

"Do you think he'll come?"

"I don't know. I don't know if I would if I were him," I admitted. "How do you think the pack is going to take it if he does?"

She shrugged. "It's hard to forget what Jason has said and done to us. He could have caused more trouble than he did. I realize that you must have once loved him to marry him and he you, but things have changed and you don't remember that, and those are hard memories to get back," she reminded me. "He hasn't been to here to try and work on the trust issue with the pack either, that might cause problems. We don't know what info he is trying to get from you, even if you don't know it and then reporting back to Ralph or someone else."

"I know that, but we won't know until we give him a chance to prove himself." I looked down at the table. "Christina did love him but you're right, things have changed. Regardless of how



happy or unhappy I was with him, the slate is clean now and I need to find out what's right for me, not Christina Kline."

"You do," she said firmly. "Even if he were to come here, you need to make a decision. I don't know how Scott feels, but he seems to like you a great deal. You know that I would side with him because he's part of the pack, but even if he wasn't, it's unfair to both men to carry on like this. Scott knows all about it but Jason doesn't. What do you think he's going to do when he finds out? He didn't like you being here to begin with. Is he going to act out against Scott or the pack and cause harm to someone, even you?" She shook her head. "Make a choice one or the other, or even be alone for a while to think things through, but you have to choose."

"You're bringing up a lot of things about Jason that I didn't think of," I said in a low voice. I didn't like to think that Jason would be capable of wreaking vengeance on the pack because of my choices. "I haven't been talking to him about the pack really, except to say that everyone is fine."

I looked toward the pool table where Logan was now talking with Scott and Howard. "I know it's not fair to either of them, and it's even more unfair to Jason because he doesn't know about me and Scott. I don't want to put the pack in danger." I hated thinking that was a possibility, but I had to admit that Madelynne was right.

"Maybe time out would be a good idea," she suggested, "or just spend time with Scott and see what happens. If you can't get Jason out of your mind then maybe you should think about seeing him. I really don't know the right answer, just suggestions. And I'm not sure I would do if I were in your shoes."

My shoes weren't exactly where I wanted to be these nights, especially when Frasier came to me later to ask me for more vitae. It hadn't been that long since his last feeding, and I was pretty sure he was wasting what I gave him just so that he could feed more often.

"Look, I can't afford to give you blood this often," I told him firmly. "If you can't control how you use the blood, maybe you should do without it for a while." At his hurt puppy look, I added, "Don't pout at me, Frasier. If you keep using your blood when you don't need to, you might not have it the one time you do. I don't think either one of us would like it if I had to rescue you again."

"I understand," he said in a low voice, almost making me feel sorry enough for him to feed him anyway. Almost.

I decided to change the subject instead. "Emily has brought it to my attention that you've been sleeping with her."

He looked at me in surprise but said nothing.

"Don't expect too much from her," I warned him. "I've been told she's quite the seductress."

"Why start worrying about me now?" he demanded with a shrug. "I need something to keep me busy while you're off with Jason, or talking to Jason, or writing Jason." His voice had begun on a flat tone and gotten sarcastic very quickly.

I raised a chastening eyebrow in his direction. "What I chose to do or not do with Jason is my business, Frasier, not yours," I said calmly. "You belong to me and what you do is my business. If you want something to keep you busy then ask, I'm sure we can find something to keep your libido under control." I could see by the look on his face that he didn't like what I was saying, but I refused to hold back. "If you can't control your sex drive, then fine, fuck Emily all you want, but don't say I didn't warn you when she dumps you like yesterday's news."

"This isn't about Emily," he replied in a flat emotionless tone. "This is about you hiring me to do a job, to watch your back. You fucking poof off to Russia without me, then to here. And



Jason..." He made a noise in the back of his throat that might have been a growl. "Do you know what Jason and Brenda were planning on doing to get you back?" he demanded. "They were gonna fucking stake you! And when I spoke up about your safety, I was told in no uncertain terms that if I got in their way, they would kill me."

By now he was talking so quickly that there was almost no pause between his words. "Then they started talking about killing you if you wouldn't come peacefully. You didn't even think to ask me about my opinion of you seeing Jason again. What did you expect me to do? Just sit here and watch you fuck up your life? I tried the only thing I could think of. You don't remember your old life, and if I can get you to be with me, then I can protect you better."

He was out of breath from his outburst, but for a moment I thought he was going to continue. Finally he shook his head and looked down in frustration.

I had to walk away to hide the tears in my eyes. All these nights I'd worried about what I was going to do with Jason and it had never once occurred to me that Frasier might have something to say about it. "Frasier, I am so sorry," I told him from the window. "You're right; I should have talked to you about it. I know why I didn't take Jason with me to Russia, but I have no idea why I didn't take you."

I turned to see him watching me sadly. "And I know that sometimes I get so caught up in protecting you and Petor that I forget about letting you take care of me once in a while." It was hard to smile, but somehow I managed. "What do you think I should do about Jason?"

He had only one question. "Do you still love him?"

I felt my smile fade away and couldn't meet his eye. "I don't know," I admitted softly. "I know Christina loved him more than anything. I know I feel something for him, but I don't know if it's love."

He stood up, and there was sympathy in his eyes. "I can't tell you what to do until you figure that out," he told me before turning and walking out of the room.

# The Trouble with Jason

THERE'S NOTHING I CAN SAY

THAT'S EVER GONNA MAKE YOU CHANGE YOUR MIND

3 DOORS DOWN - BEHIND THOSE EYES

One Sunday evening in October the boys and I went to Flint to meet Jason for dinner. When I suggested that he bring Sarah along as well he declined, stating that she had business elsewhere.

The meal went well enough, I suppose. Petor had some serious reservations about going to begin with, but Jason, while not friendly, was not antagonistic either. Frasier, on the other hand, was a problem. Of course, he'd been a problem for weeks now, becoming more and more intrusive on both my personal space and my time with Scott.

I could tell that Jason didn't like the rift that had opened between Frasier and him, but my ghoul didn't seem to want to solve the problem. Jason settled for talking about our past, as if the reminder of better days would rekindle Frasier's goodwill. In a way it backfired, as Frasier hadn't told me much of anything that Jason brought up. I made a mental note to chastise Frasier later, and suggested to Jason that we get on with our date.

We left the restaurant in Jason's rental car, driving through the city streets in search of somewhere quiet that we could talk. We found a park where we got out and walked hand in hand through the grass as we continued to talk about the memories that had come back to me. We discussed the various memories I had of Brenda, of Cormac, and of Michael.

While we were talking a flash of memory ran across my mind.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*"No, thank you," Nina said firmly.*

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

*"I know that some of the memories are bad," I told him when the memory had run its course. "I know that-that my life wasn't all bad, but I've been remembering mostly intense circumstances, and usually the most intense circumstances are bad ones."*

"What else do you remember?" he asked.

I didn't want to tell him about what I'd just remembered, not yet, not until I decided how I felt about it, so I avoided looking at him as I replied. "I remember a dark street. I was looking for you and crying."

He stopped and turned until we were facing each other. When I saw his frown, I knew he didn't know what night I was talking about. I wondered how many nights I'd spent looking for him and crying.

"A dark street?" he asked. "Do you remember where?"

I shook my head and looked away. "I know there was someone else there and that I didn't want them to come close. There was a limo, and you—" My voice broke and I had to clear my throat before starting again. "You were wearing some kind of cloak."

He reacted as if he'd been physically struck. He put my hand on his chest and held it there flat against his body.

"I was crying because I couldn't find you and you were so cold." I looked up at him through the tears and anger that clouded my vision. "You didn't trust me; you didn't want me to be there."

His free hand went around the back of my neck and he pulled me forward until our foreheads touched. "I didn't want anyone then," he said so quietly I almost didn't hear his voice breaking. "It's not that I didn't trust you, honey, it was never a question of that or I wouldn't have even taken you to Europe with me in the first place."

At the pain in his words my face crumpled and tears spilled from my eyes.

He pulled back and tilted my chin up until I looked him in the eye. He wiped the tears from my face and said softly, "I'd just lost everything that had mattered to me with the exception of you and even that was debatable. I felt worthless and I thought all my value as an individual had left with my faith. I didn't want to subject you to that."

"You didn't lose me," I whispered, my voice shaking so badly I couldn't have raised it if I'd tried. "You pushed me away. The only thing I cared about was you, and you made me feel small and weak and worthless."

"Don't you see that that's what I had to do to ensure that you were safe?" he demanded with an edge of desperation to his voice. "I couldn't deal with what I'd become. How could I expect you to?"

"You didn't trust me," I replied softly. "You didn't trust me to love you. Brenda didn't trust me to take care of myself. Antonio didn't trust me to know the truth about who my sire was. Michael didn't trust me to pick my own friends. Cormac didn't trust me with.... God, I don't remember!" I wanted to scream in frustration at the black hole in my head, but I knew it wouldn't do me any good. "What kind of person was I if nobody trusted me, Jason? Why did any of you even bother to come after me?"

"I can't speak for anyone but myself, honey, but you're right," he replied in a low voice full of regret. "I didn't trust that you could accept me for what I'd become." He took my face in his hands and lifted my face until I was looking into his eyes once again. "But that was my problem, not yours. It's my fault that we were apart for as long as we were." His tone told me that he regretted what had happened.

I reached up to touch his cheek. "And this time it's my fault. I'm so sorry, Jason. I just wanted to protect you."

He gave me a bittersweet smile and mirrored my actions "It's no one's fault," he assured me. "I'm really trying to understand how you feel and I'm trying not to push too hard. We just have to be patient. I love you and nothing will change that."

"I don't want to be patient!" I pulled back and walked a few steps away, hugging my stomach and trying not to cry. "I'm tired of waiting for my memory to come back so I know what to do. I just get little pieces and I don't know what they mean." I turned to look at him. "And I'm tired of wondering if everything everyone tells me is a lie."

"Do you doubt any of the things I have told you?" he asked softly, standing there with his hands in his pocket, looking as handsome as ever.

"No, Jason, not everything," I whispered. "I remember that we loved each other, I know you're not lying about that." I wanted to go to him, to lose myself in his arms and forget all the darkness that had fallen between us, but I knew that as good as it would feel it wouldn't help in the long run. I looked away and took a deep breath to gather my wits. "If you felt that you had to force me back to Salem when you first came to Detroit, and Frasier tried to stop you, would you have killed him?"

He looked at me for a long moment before answering. "If I thought his actions would have hurt you in any way I would have disabled him enough so that he couldn't have stopped what we needed to do."

Before I could say anything to that he raised his hand to stop me. "Hear me out on this. Frasier is your ghoul. That means that he will do what you want him to, and that doesn't always mean it will be what's best for you. When you first disappeared we had no idea what happened, hell, we still don't know everything that went on that night. For all we knew the pack were part of the reason you disappeared. There were a lot of things said that night by all of us; me, Brenda, Frasier. Getting you back safe was the major concern and if Frasier had done anything to jeopardize your safety I would have stopped him. You probably don't want to hear that, but I had to be prepared to do what I had to do."

His argument was a solid one, but I couldn't let it rest, not yet. I had to think about Petor's safety. Jason and the others from Salem had made it clear that they didn't trust him. Though they hadn't accused him outright, I knew they believed he was connected to Malcolm, that he'd had something to do with my memory loss.

"What about Petor?" I demanded. "I know you think he had something to do with my memory loss, but he didn't. I have to know that you won't hurt him."

He turned away. "Petor is a part of your life now." I could tell by his tone that he didn't like that fact one bit. "I can't do anything about that."

"Would you if you could?" I knew he didn't like Petor, but I had to be sure that he wouldn't hurt him. "Look, I'm not asking you to like him, just that you not hurt him. I have to protect him, Jason, even from you."

He kept his face turned away so I couldn't see his eyes, or his expression. "I won't say that I like the idea of having another man around taking up more of your time. I know that this is going to sound like I'm jealous and maybe I am." When he turned to look at me his expression was an uncomfortable one. "I love you. Nothing is going to change that. Any hang ups I have I'm trying to deal with and I am standing here right now with God as my witness and saying that I won't do anything to hurt Petor."

My eyes closed in relief and I couldn't help but smile. "You have no reason to be jealous of Petor. He and Frasier keep each other occupied, most of the time." I took a step closer to him,

wanting to be near him. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to push you, but I had to know that they will be safe with you, as safe as I am."

"I would never do anything to hurt you." He seemed awkward, as if he'd just laid a big part of himself out for me to see and he wasn't sure how I would react, or how he should continue.

"Oh, Jason, I know that." I moved close enough to lay a hand on his chest, to feel his muscles move beneath his shirt. "Whatever happened before, what I remembered—I know that you wouldn't hurt me." He put his hand on my cheek and when his eyes met mine I felt like I could drown in their hazel depths. "I'm not so sure about the Tremere though," I murmured, looking away to try and break the hold he had on my senses.

"You're still Tremere, honey, like it or not," he said with a smile. "It's a part of you no matter what your memories tell you."

"My memories don't tell me much about clan, Jason," I reminded him. "And it's not like they've been hot to have me back, now is it? Must not be a big loss."

He shook his head and dropped his hand to my shoulder. "It's only been a few weeks. Believe me; they'll be on your doorstep sooner than you think."

I didn't like the idea, but I didn't want to talk about the clan any more. "I wish things were different," I admitted softly, looking off into the dark city streets that bounded the park. "I really fucked everything up didn't I? Going after Malcolm, I mean."

"Does it really matter?" he asked softly. "What's important is that we found each other and that we are attempting to put our lives together again."

I stopped and turned to look at him. "I don't know that I'd be half as forgiving."

"The time that we spent apart after my embrace was a living hell." He put a hand on my waist and took a step closer. "I'm not perfect and don't profess to be. I have my limits, too, but when it comes to you I'm willing to do whatever I need to so that we can be together."

"Since you say that... what do you think about coming to Detroit for a few days?" I paused for a moment, then said quickly. "There's a hotel not far away from the pub and you could get to know the pack better, work on building trust between you. I know it's a lot to ask, but—" I forced myself to stop babbling and wait for his reaction.

He seemed surprised. "Do they still have a problem with me?"

"It's just that they don't know you," I said firmly, hoping I was right. "I'm sure once they do everything will be fine."

He studied my face for a long moment. "I'll do whatever I have to in order to prove myself to you, but to be honest right now I'm really uncomfortable about spending time in Detroit." He hesitated a moment, then added quickly, "It's not you. I'm leery of the Kindred in town after what happened when we were there."

I couldn't help but be disappointed, but I did my best to hide it. Of course in a way I was relieved since I knew I couldn't have let Jason come back to Detroit without telling him the truth of my relationship with Scott. "I understand."

He thought for a moment, then offered, "Tell you what, why don't we try a weekend and see what happens?"

I couldn't believe he was serious. "Really?"

"Really," he replied, trying to pull me into his embrace.

I put a hand on his chest to keep some distance between us. If he took me into his arms I'd forget all about telling him the truth. I pulled away and started walking, peeking at him through

my hair. "Since we're being honest, I have something I have to tell you before you come to Detroit."

He stopped and looked at me. "What?"

I knew I had to just say it. No matter what way I told him, it was going to hurt like hell. I turned to look him in the eye. "I've been dating Scott."

He dropped my hand stepped back, his eyes flashing. As he looked away I could see the effort it was taking to control his temper. "You're what?" he gasped, his hands clenching and unclenching at his side.

I hated knowing that I'd upset him like this, but there was no help for it. "I've been dating Scott."

"So, what," he asked harshly, "on the six nights of the week that I don't see you, you shack up with him in some room above the bar?"

The contempt in his voice made my blood boil. "It's not like that."

He stopped pacing and glared at me. "It's not like what?"

"It's not like I spend every free minute in Scott's bed." The minute the words were out of my mouth I wanted them back.

"Oh, but there have been moments," he drawled harshly, his face hard as stone in the cold moonlight.

I met his eye as calmly as I could. "Do you want the truth, or do you want me to lie?"

He quickly strode a few feet away and drove his fist into a tree trunk. I could hear the sound of bones breaking, and the scent of blood filled the air. I called his name and took a step toward him before I could stop myself. He wouldn't welcome my touch right now, not when the wound my words had caused was still so fresh.

I watched him walk around for a few minutes, nursing his hand and cursing under his breath. "Why—?" he said at last, and then stopped as if reconsidering what he was going to say. He paced for a moment longer, holding his bleeding hand against his chest, before turning to me once more. "So giving you space means I should be okay with this?"

"I never said you'd be okay with this," I denied hotly. I'd known he wouldn't like me sleeping with another man, but I couldn't say I'd anticipated this type of reaction.

"I'm glad you at least thought that much," he growled. "Has this been from the beginning or did you start fucking him after we found you?"

Jason wasn't one to swear, and his profanity hurt me as much as anything else he'd said. What could I tell him but the truth? "I did not remember you when we got together."

"So have you been with him in the time that we've been together again?" he demanded. When I turned away without answering, he shook his head and began moving in a wide circle around me toward the car. "Then why do you want me to come to Detroit? It sounds like you want to have your cake and eat it to." He was rubbing his hand, and I could see that he had finally healed it, although it was still covered in blood.

"Look, I'm just trying to find out where I belong, okay?" I shot back angrily. "I remember what it was like to love you, Jason, but I don't know if I feel that anymore. I know that being with you makes me feel something I don't feel anywhere else and I know I should give that a chance to turn back into love."

"But you want to have a back up plan," he bit out.

"Is Sarah your back up plan?" I retorted. I knew there was more to his ghoulish than he claimed, especially since he didn't seem to want me anywhere near her.

"I told you what Sarah was," he growled. "Don't bring that into this. Don't try to discolor this issue by trying to paint me the enemy, because I'm not."

I met his angry gaze without flinching. "Neither am I."

"I will not come to Detroit for any amount of time if you're involved with him," he announced with a brutal movement of his bloody hand.

Though his ultimatum was a far cry from his claim earlier that he'd do anything to win my trust, I couldn't really blame him for the change of heart. Regardless, living with the pack I would always be 'involved' with Scott, whether or not I was sleeping with him. "And if I'm not?"

"Then I guess we have one more issue that we have to work on," he replied, "and that would be trust."

I couldn't help the roll of my eyes. He didn't understand where I was coming from, and he wasn't even trying to understand. "This whole thing is about trust."

"Yeah, whether you can trust me," he agreed roughly. "Now I have to wonder if I can trust you."

"Doesn't feel very good, does it?" I demanded harshly. "Hell, I don't even know if I can trust me." Hugging myself I turned and walked a few feet away to put some distance between us. "This whole relationship thing is easier for you, you have your memories," I told him. "I get more confused with every memory I get back. And I keep thinking that you don't want to be with me, with who I am now, you just want Christina Kline back."

"And do you blame me?" he raged. "Don't give me this poor-little-hurt-me, Chr-Tina. I love you, and that's never going to change. But when we said those words in Austria they meant something to me, and I can guarantee to you right now that if I lost my memory tomorrow, and found out that I was married, I would not be involved with anybody else. Maybe that's just me." His tone, his look, his attitude, everything about him was harsh and unforgiving.

I wasn't feeling too forgiving myself. He still talked as if I should behave like his wife, like Christina would have behaved. He really didn't get it, and I was beginning to think he never would. "And maybe you don't know what you're talking about," I shot back.

"Maybe I don't, but I know what's in my heart," he declared. "And I guess maybe I made the mistake of thinking I knew what was in yours."

"How can you when I don't?" I exclaimed. "I don't know how I felt except for little pieces that don't mean a whole lot. You can never know what this is like."

"You know, you're right," he conceded. "I might never know what it's like to lose my memory, but let me tell you what I do know. I know what it was like to be away from you for two years because I was trying to deal with what I was, and I also know that in that two year period, you went on with your life. You had Luke."

I didn't understand why he was bringing up something his wife had done in another lifetime. If he hadn't forgiven Christina for sleeping with another man, why the hell had he married her? "I can't answer for things I don't remember," I said reasonably. "I don't even remember Luke, or anything that happened with him, but I do remember you leaving me. You didn't seem to care very much what I did or who I did it with."

"I left you because I didn't think you'd want me as I was," he replied coldly.

"Then you know exactly how I feel," I shot back, because here we were, arguing about him not wanting me as I was.

"You're wrong," he declared, "I left you because I loved you, I never questioned my love for you."

"That's a good reason to leave," I drawled sarcastically.

"Maybe not," he conceded, "but I left to spare you hating me for what I was."

This really wasn't that much different, no matter what he thought. "Like you hate me now."

"I don't hate you," he denied, "but your actions have made it really hard for me to take the next step."

Before I could ask what the next step was, a police car drove by the park slowly. It occurred to me that we'd been yelling, and that someone had probably called them to stop the noise and see what the problem was. I heard Jason curse under his breath and I knew we couldn't stay there.

"Obviously this isn't the place for this," I muttered. "I'm not sure there is a place for this."

In the darkness I saw Jason put his hand in his pocket to hide the blood. "Let's get out of here," he barked.

Frankly, with his anger I'd almost expected him to leave me there. We rode back to the hotel with only the sounds of the road to fill the silence between us. His hands were clenched on the wheel, and there was a tense look on his face I didn't remember seeing before. I wanted to apologize, but I didn't really know if I was sorry. I did know that anything I said would only make things worse.

Jason parked the car and killed the engine, but still we sat there in silence. He clenched and unclenched the hand he'd hurt earlier as if working the kinks out of it. At last I could take the silence no longer.

"This isn't exactly how I wanted the evening to end," I murmured.

"The night's still young," he shot back scornfully. "I'm sure you could make it back to Detroit in time to have a little fun."

For a moment I wanted to scream, to slap him for saying those words that bored holes through my heart. I knew he was hurting, but I didn't understand why he had to say such a hateful thing. I hoped it was just his pain talking, but I knew in my heart that things would never be the same between us. If this were the last time we saw each other, it was time for apologies.

"I know this probably doesn't mean anything to you right now," I said softly, "but I'm sorry I hurt you."

"And that's supposed to make everything okay?" he asked in a low voice that was so full of pain that I wanted to cry.

"I never said that." I'd never meant to hurt him, not really. I just wanted to be accepted for who I was. Scott did that for me. Jason obviously never would.

"What do you expect me to do?" he demanded.

"I honestly don't know," I told him. "I just know that I couldn't have let you come to Detroit without knowing. Would you rather that I'd let you come and found out when you got there?"

"I would rather that you could have taken at least one thing at face value and realize that the vows we took meant something," he stated coldly.

We. That would have been him and Christina. "Maybe if I remembered more they would," I shot back. I didn't remember the vows they had taken, might never remember them. "Maybe they didn't mean to me what they mean to you." They certainly hadn't meant anything when I'd slept with Scott, and at the moment they didn't mean very much at all.

When I got out of the car, he did too. "I meant what I said, Christina," he warned me. "I will not come to Detroit as long as you're involved with him." With that he turned and started walking toward the hotel.



"You never answered my question," I called after him. "Would you come if I wasn't?"

He stopped and tossed his head back without turning, then said with a sigh, "I already said I would." Without a final look in my direction, he made his way toward the hotel entrance.

As I watched him go I whispered his name, mourning all that we'd once had or might have had if Christina had not felt the need to save her enemy.

# Choices

IT'S HARD TO SAY

IT'S TIME TO SAY IT

GOODBYE

NICKELBACK - PHOTOGRAPH

I couldn't regret telling Jason the truth. While I didn't necessarily like the way he'd handled it, I'd had no defense against his anger. The countless' ritual had proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that I had once been the Christina who had married Jason Kline, and in a perfect reality, she wouldn't be sleeping with anyone else. The problem was that reality wasn't perfect.

Scott gave me the acceptance I needed so desperately. The only thing he asked of me was that I be myself. How could I turn away from that? And if even I wanted to leave Scott, I had no intention of leaving the pack. If Jason did come to Detroit, there would always be the memory of my affair with Scott standing between us.

I turned and walked away from the hotel, away from the man I could remember loving more than life itself. A part of me wished that I still loved Jason, wished that I had left with him when he had gone with Brenda. A bigger part of me was glad things were over. The argument we'd just had proved to me that he could never accept me for who I was now, never love me for who I was. He'd always love his wife, and I wasn't her any more, not really.

Despite his claim that if he'd lost his memory he would have held to his vows, Jason would never understand what it was for me without my memories. He wasn't even trying to understand how I felt. Cormac was the only one who knew what I was going through, but even that was little comfort.

A quick phone call to Petor from the dining room of a nearby McDonalds brought the boys back from wherever they'd been headed. I saw the Mustang pull into the parking lot and went out to meet them. Frasier got out with a wary look around and asked me what was wrong, but I ignored him to climb into the back seat. "Let's go home, Petor," I told him. Within minutes we were on the expressway headed back to Detroit.

"Tina, what's wrong?" Frasier demanded irritably. From the tone of his voice, it wasn't the first time he'd asked.

"Nothing," I said firmly, unwilling to admit how deeply I was hurting. "Jason and I had a little... disagreement, that's all."

"Bullshit," he shot back.

I knew I shouldn't let him talk to me like that, but my nerves were pretty well frayed and I let it pass. Besides, he was right. "Okay, so it was a big disagreement," I admitted. "No big deal."

"Bullshit," Petor replied from behind the wheel. I looked up to see him watching me in the rear view mirror, a worried look in his eye.

Frasier smirked at Petor's response, but when he looked back at me his face was serious. The look in his eye told me that the prerequisite lies were over, that it was time for me to tell him the truth.

I turned back to the window, wondering what to say to them. In the end, I kept it simple. "I told him about Scott. He didn't like it."

"Do you care?" Frasier demanded.

"Do I?" I hadn't realized I'd spoken aloud until Frasier responded.

"Yes, do you?"

"Doesn't really matter, does it?" I growled. "It's done." My tone must have warned them that I didn't want to talk about it. We rode in silence back to Detroit.

As the miles past I told myself that I probably should break things off with Scott, at least until I knew where my head was at. If my memory ever came back, I might well hate myself for having driven Jason away. Even if I never remembered Christina's life completely, I didn't want to be in a relationship just because I was afraid to be alone.

I went right up to my room when we got back to the pub without talking to anyone. I paced for a little while, trying to make my mind up about what I should do. It occurred to me that I was sick of doing what I 'should' do. I was almost relieved when Madelynne came up to talk to me.

"What happened?" she demanded. "The boys said something about a disagreement with you and Jason, seems like it's more than that."

I tried to smile. "Well, maybe it was a big disagreement."

"It must be for you to just walk in then come right up here without even saying hello to anyone," she drawled.

I ran a hand through my hair. "I'm sorry, I just—it wasn't a good night. I'm sorry."

"So are you going to tell me what happened or what?" she asked as she walked across the room to sit down on the edge of the bed.

"Well it started out pretty good," I told her as I started to pace once more. "We were talking about stuff, and getting some things clear between us, Petor's safety, and him maybe coming to Detroit for a weekend. Then it went to hell."

"And...?" she prompted.

It wasn't that I was afraid to tell her, exactly. Maybe I was ashamed. Still, I owed her a lot, least of all the truth, especially about this. "I told him that Scott and I were dating."

"I guess that he did not like it," she murmured.

"He really didn't like it," I agreed. "He hit a tree and was bleeding—" My voice broke at the memory, and it was a moment before I could continue. "I mean I know he had a right to be upset, you know? But he didn't even try to understand where I was coming from."

"What did you expect him to do?" she demanded. "I mean not to side with him or anything, because I would much rather see you with Scott, but would you have taken it well if the situation was turned?" She hesitated as if she didn't want to say more, but in the end she did. "If he really loves you and wants to make it work he will think about it and realize his reaction was out of line and call you to apologize."

"He might," I sighed, not sure if that was what I really wanted. "I knew he was going to be upset, and he has every right to be. If I was in his shoes, I'd be pissed. I've known it all along, you know? I know here," I said, pointing to my temple, "that I shouldn't be sleeping with Scott, but here," I pointed to my heart, "I just don't know."

"Is that how you feel about Jason too?" she asked.

"Jason pisses me off," I all but growled. "All he can talk about is his precious Christina." It was all I could do not to spit at the name. "It's like he wants to erase from my being every second I've been here and push me into the plastic mold that was his wife."

"Then maybe the best thing to do for now is to move on with your life here and forget about him, at least for a while," she suggested with a sly smile. "Maybe see where your relationship with Scott is going. You never know, it could be all you ever wanted and more."

"Maybe," I admitted as I sat down on the bed next to her. Talking about Jason made me sad as well as angry. "He agreed to come here, before I told him about Scott. Even after we argued he said that he would still come if I stopped seeing Scott."

"What do you really want to do?" she demanded. "Think about it just for a minute. Will Jason let you be yourself as you are now or just demand you be the 'cookie cutter wife'? What kind of life do you want to lead?"

I looked away from her fierce eyes and stared at my hands for a long time. I didn't want to be just Jason's wife or Brenda's sister. I might have been happy in that life once, but I couldn't picture myself living it now. If I left Scott, would I be forced back into the not so loving arms of the Tremere or would I be on my own? "I don't want to go back there, Madelynne," I whispered. "I don't want to be Christina Kline."

"Then the decision is made," she announced. "You are Tina Andrews, member of our pack and adopted member of the Gangrel clan, Scott's girlfriend and my friend." When she put her arm around my shoulders, it all sounded so simple.

I realized abruptly that fear of being alone wasn't why I was with Scott. Yes, being with Scott did make me feel more like part of the family that was the pack, but that wasn't why I didn't want to leave him. He made me feel safe, something Jason had never done. Scott had been more of a lover to me than Jason, more of a friend. It wasn't a bad beginning, not really.

Feeling better than I had in weeks, I smiled and leaned against her strength. "I'm glad you found me," I told her. "I'm glad Chaos sent me here, no matter what his reasons were." Sitting there beside her I felt more resolve to be myself than I'd ever felt before. "I am Tina Andrews."

"Glad you feel that way," she said with a grin. "I won't let you change your mind now, you know that?"

I felt my smile start to fade. "I hope I won't have to make you hold me to it if I get more of her memories back."

"Why do you say that?" she asked softly.

"What if it all comes back some day?" I replied, shaking my head. "What if Christina liked being like that?"

"Then we deal with that when the time comes," she assured me. "By then you will have moved on with your life here and won't even want to go back to that kind of life."

"I hope you're right," I agreed slowly. "I hate thinking that even a part of me liked being the Tremere clone."

"Let's not worry about that until it even happens, if it does. Now what do you think about talking to Scott about all this?" she suggested.

"I know I should," I said with a nod. "He'll probably appreciate knowing I'm not seeing Jason any more."

Scott didn't come back to the pub that night, but I really hadn't expected him to. In the half hour before dawn I pulled the small wooden jewelry box from the bottom drawer and opened it, looking for a moment at the pieces of Christina's life that it held. I wondered if I'd ever regret the choice I'd made tonight. In the end it didn't matter. I had to live for me now, not for a woman whose life I might never remember.

Sorting through the necklaces I was wearing took longer than removing the wedding rings from their chains. I looked at the rings for a long minute, remembering how it felt to be with Jason, to touch him, to make love with him. A part of me wanted to feel that way again, but I knew if I gave in to what he wanted now, I'd be giving over a part of myself.

While I knew it wasn't fair to ask Jason to share his wife with another man, I wasn't his wife any more. Christina Kline had died somewhere in Russia saving the man that was both her enemy and her friend. She was mourned by her husband and family, but it was time for me to stop pretending that I mourned her, that I wanted her life to be mine.

I laid the rings gently in the box and closed the lid.

# A Matter of Time

WHY IS IT NEVER ENOUGH

NO MATTER WHAT I DO

THE MONKEES - NEVER ENOUGH

*I heard an agonized scream and spun toward the church. I gasped to see Jason bound to the altar by glowing bands of blue light, his face a mask of pain. As I watched, light wrapped around Jason's body and he arched in a paroxysm of torment and his mouth opened in a soundless scream.*

I woke with a start, sitting up in the darkness and wondering with no little panic where the hell I was. A moment later I realized that I was home, and safe, and alone. I did my best to shake off the remnant of the nightmare I was near certain had been a memory and got dressed.

Madelynne had been introducing me to people she thought might help me out with the protection agency, and finally our efforts seemed to be making progress. She hooked me up with a financial advisor that she'd been talking quite a bit too and I managed to get a loan with a decent interest rate.

We wanted to find a building somewhere near the pub for the agency's home, something with an open floor plan, and bay doors so that Petor could work on the company vehicles. We hoped that we would have room for some office space as well and perhaps living space on a second floor.

I couldn't think of a name for the agency right off, but Frasier came up with something that everyone seemed to like. Though I was still reluctant to use Christina's name, I agreed to his suggestion only because it used her maiden name. Besides, 'Strong Security Agency' had a nice ring to it.

Scott came in on his way to work one night when I'd just gotten off the phone with a real estate agent. The boys were already at work so I asked if he had time to check out a building with me that wasn't too far away.

As usual, he didn't mention anything about Jason or ask about how my date had gone, but I thought this once I needed to bring it up while we were on the ride over. "I thought you'd like to know that I won't be seeing Jason again."

He glanced over at me in surprise. "Why?"

"Because we had an argument," I replied with a shrug. When he gave me an expectant look, I added, "About things." He didn't say anything, just kept looking at me. "About you," I said at last. "We didn't see things eye to eye, and I won't be seeing him again." I pulled into the parking lot of the building we were supposed to look at. "This is it." The realtor was waiting for us so for the moment the topic was dropped.

The building was a little bigger than I had expected, with four floors, all mostly empty. The main floor had an area we could remodel into offices, and enough bay doors to keep Petor happy. It sat alone on a block of land surrounded by a high security fence and an ample parking lot. While it wasn't the classiest place, I thought it would most work for our needs. Just to be sure I made an appointment for the boys to meet the realtor the next day in case I had missed something we needed.

While Scott didn't bring up my argument with Jason, he did seem happy about my decision and we began spending a lot more time together. Over the next few weeks he asked me to stay with him a lot more often, or stayed with me at the pub.

Madelynne seemed interested in boosting her status, so we began frequenting some of the local Kindred establishments. I'd been to Jimi's the night I came to Detroit, and the Sanctuary a few nights later, but there was also the Zombie Zoo, a coffee house and several Ventrue restaurants that Kindred liked to frequent. Places I knew were Tremere I opted to stay away from as much as possible. While they didn't seem to show any interest in me, I didn't want to push the issue.

Madelynne's sire, Patrick, showed up at the pub a few times to make an ass of himself. If Madelynne wasn't at the pub, he left easily. Rumor had it that he had fallen in with Ralph right after coming to town, and claimed he was relocating. No one but the pack seemed to know he was Madelynne's sire, or at least no one was saying anything if they did know.

I talked to Cormac a few times on the phone. He assured me that the Verbenam magic had stabilized, but he had no idea if anyone had seen the Trimuritive. My conversations with Christina's brother tended to make Scott nervous. He seemed worried that someone from her life would come back and try to make me go back, although Cormac never mentioned anything of the sort.

Not even Antonio brought up the idea of me returning to Christina's life, although he continued to call me by her name in the letters Andrea brought me.

OCTOBER 16, 2000

MY DEAREST CHRISTINA,

HOW WONDERFUL IT WAS TO HEAR FROM YOU. I AM SO SORRY, BUT IT TOOK ME LONGER THAN I WOULD HAVE LIKED TO RESPOND TO YOUR LETTER BUT PRESSING BUSINESS HERE AT THE CHANTRY FORCED ME TO PUT IT OFF UNTIL NOW. YOU KNOW HOW POLITICS CAN BE AT TIMES.

ANDREA HELPED TO PUT MY MIND AT EASE BY INFORMING ME THAT YOU LOOKED WELL WHEN SHE DELIVERED MY LETTER TO YOU. DO NOT TAKE THAT STATEMENT TO BELIEVE THAT I SENT HER TO SPY ON YOU, HOWEVER. I WAS TELLING THE TRUTH IN MY LETTER WHY I SENT HER WITH IT, BUT IT EASED ME TO KNOW THAT YOU WERE OKAY PHYSICALLY.

I AM SHOCKED TO LEARN THAT YOU THINK YOU HAVE DISAPPOINTED ME IN ANY WAY, MY DEAR. I AM SURE THAT SOME MAY SAY THAT I LACK THE SKILLS NECESSARY TO BE AN EFFECTIVE SIRE AND I AM NOT UNAWARE THAT I HAVE ALLOWED ALL OF MY CHILDREN A BIT MORE LEEWAY THAN I SHOULD HAVE. I SUPPOSE IT WAS OUT OF LOVE THAT I ALLOWED IT AND NEVER RECONSIDERED MY STANDING WHEN ANYONE QUESTIONED ME ABOUT IT.

AS YOU KNOW, MICHAEL WAS MY FIRST CHILDE AND AS I AM SURE YOU CAN IMAGINE, I COULD NOT HAVE CONTROLLED HIM EVEN IF I TRIED. HE WAS LIKE YOU IN SO MANY WAYS. YOU BOTH WERE LIKE SIEVES, CRAVING KNOWLEDGE FASTER THAN I COULD TEACH YOU. IT STILL AMAZES ME HOW YOU MET EVERY CHALLENGE HEAD ON AND NEVER ACCEPTED HALF AN ANSWER. DO NOT CHANGE IN THAT REGARD.

NO CHRISTINA, YOU HAVE NOT DISAPPOINTED ME IN ANY WAY. IN FACT I AM EXTREMELY PROUD OF THE WAY YOU HAVE DEALT WITH THE THINGS THAT LIFE HAS THROWN AT YOU. YOU AND BRENDA ARE THE CLOSEST THING TO DAUGHTERS THAT I WILL EVER HAVE; THERE IS NO NEED TO THANK ME FOR ANYTHING. I UNDERSTAND THAT THERE HAVE BEEN THINGS IN THE PAST THAT YOU FELT YOU NEEDED TO DO. I MAY NOT HAVE AGREED WITH EVERYTHING BUT THEY WERE YOUR CHOICES TO MAKE, NOT MINE. I HAVE NO RIGHT TO JUDGE YOU.

I WOULD LIKE TO TAKE A MOMENT NOW TO ADDRESS THE MEMORIES YOU SPOKE OF CONCERNING OUR PAST TOGETHER. YES, WE DID FIGHT ABOUT THE BLOOD WALK, I WILL NOT DENY IT NOR WILL I APOLOGIZE FOR MY LACK OF TELLING YOU ABOUT THE RITUAL SOONER. I HAD DECIDED EARLY ON AFTER I ADOPTED YOU THAT YOU WERE NOT READY FOR WHAT THE BLOOD



WALK WOULD TELL YOU. I WANTED YOU TO HAVE THE TIME TO ADJUST TO WHAT YOU WERE AND TO BECOME COMFORTABLE IN YOUR OWN SKIN AGAIN. THAT IS NOT TO SAY THAT I NEVER INTENDED TO TELL YOU ABOUT THE RITUAL. IN FACT I WANTED TO BE THE ONE TO DO IT FOR YOU. PLEASE UNDERSTAND THAT I DID NOT MEAN TO HURT YOU IN ANYWAY BY NOT SHARING THE INFORMATION WITH YOU TO BEGIN WITH. PERHAPS I WAS JUST BEING SELFISH. THERE HAS NOT BEEN A NIGHT THAT HAS GONE BY THAT I DON'T WISH THAT I HAD BEEN THE ONE TO EMBRACE YOU.

THE MEMORIES YOU HAVE OF BEING IN A CELL STEMS FROM THE TIME YOU WERE KIDNAPPED BY THE FORMER PRINCE OF SALEM. THE LATE ELIZABETH BATHORI THOUGHT THAT SHE COULD PERSUADE MICHAEL AND ME INTO RETRIEVING SOMETHING FOR HER AND THE MEMORY YOU HAVE IS OF ME ATTEMPTING TO ACT LIKE YOU MEANT NOTHING TO ME. IT IS ONE OF THE HARDEST THINGS I HAVE EVER DONE. IT IS OF NO CONSEQUENCE NOW, THOUGH, AS THE WOMAN MET FINAL DEATH YEARS AGO.

AS I HAVE SAID BEFORE, I UNDERSTAND YOU NEED TO FEEL SAFE AND IF STAYING IN DETROIT MAKES YOU FEEL SAFE THEN BY ALL MEANS STAY THERE FOR NOW. ON THE OTHER HAND, IF YOU EVER WANT TO VISIT HERE JUST LET ME KNOW AND I WILL ARRANGE IT. THERE IS NO PRESSURE; IT IS JUST AN OPEN INVITATION.

AS FAR AS FINDING THIS CHILDE YOU HAVE MADE I WILL DO WHAT I CAN TO LOCATE HIM. I CANNOT PROMISE THAT I WILL LEARN ANYTHING BECAUSE RUSSIA CAN BE A VERY HARD PLACE TO EXTRACT INFORMATION FROM BUT I WILL TRY.

I REGRET THAT I MUST CLOSE FOR NOW. I HAVE TO ADMIT THAT I FIND THE EXCHANGE THAT WE FIND OURSELVES INVOLVED IN IS BECOMING EASIER TO COPE WITH. WRITING RATHER THAN SPEAKING GIVES ONE THE ABILITY TO THINK ABOUT WHAT THEY ARE GOING TO SAY BEFORE THEY SAY IT. I AM NOT SAYING THAT I AM HOLDING BACK ANY INFORMATION FROM YOU, BUT THIS WAY GIVES ME THE OPPORTUNITY TO BE SURE THAT I DO NOT OFFEND YOU WITH THE WAY I SAY THINGS.

I HOPE TO HEAR FROM YOU SOON. CALL ME IF YOU NEED ANYTHING.

ANTONIO

I found his letter quite interesting, although I didn't quite believe his story about my time in the cell. Somehow I thought there was a lot more to the situation than he was telling me, but short of calling him or initiating a mind link, I'd never be sure.

Shortly after Andrea left with my letter, Cormac called to say that he was coming into town on Tuesday with Brenda. They wanted to talk to me about memory issues and while I wasn't as sure as I'd once been that I wanted to remember everything, I agreed to meet with them. Madelynne had no problem with them coming to the pub as long as they behaved themselves.

*I got out of the car and watched Cormac jump out of the back seat. His right foot landed softly on the trunk of the Mustang, but he wiped the mark off gently before I could say anything.*

*Since he was so anxious I let Cormac lead the way toward the alley. I stayed about five feet back and kept an eye on the surrounding area. I saw nothing, but extended inch long claws on my left hand just in case the Kindred was good at hiding. I kept the hand close to my thigh.*

There were two letters waiting for me when I woke the night Brenda and Cormac were to visit. One was from Brenda herself, and the other from Lena Stockton. After sending Frasier to the airport to pick up our visitors, I sat down at the bar to read the letters. I opened the one from Lena first.

*October 12, 2000*

*Dear Christina,*

*I hope that this letter finds you safe and hopefully happy. This is probably one of the strangest correspondences that I have ever had the misfortune of writing. How does one address a person who is like a member of the family to them when that person doesn't remember anything about you?*

*I have talked with Jason and he has told me of the ritual your sister and the others performed in hopes of gaining back some of your memories. I hope that all is developing for the good in that department but rest assured that Jason has already informed me that those memories will not include anything of our relationship. I have to admit that it saddened me to hear of this but what else could have happened? I understand that you are probably being inundated with a great deal of information at this point and don't need to add anything extra on top of what you are already experiencing.*

*I don't mean to keep you. I just wanted to write a short note to let you know that Mikael and I are both thinking of you and wishing you well. I have enclosed a recent snapshot of Christopher in case you are interested. Please share it with Jason and let him know that his godson can almost walk on his own.*

*Best of luck,*

*Lena Stockton*

I tried not to be offended at some of the words on the page. If writing to me was so misfortunate, why had she bothered? I wondered if she was simply trying to twist the knife everyone from Christina's life seemed intent on driving into my heart. It was obvious that she no longer wanted me in her son's life, the reference to 'Jason's godson' made that clear. I set her letter aside and opened the one from Brenda.

October 18, 2000

Sister,

It does my heart good to hear from you again. I hope that things are still going well for you in Detroit and that all your new friends are fine as well. It seems timely that I received your letter the day I did. Apparently the clothing that you had taken with you when you left here last has reappeared in your room. I don't know the reason for it to reappear like it has and I haven't found any transmitters or other forms of sabotage within the bag that would indicate that someone wanted to do anything other than return your things to you. If you like, I will send these things on to you or they can stay here in case you have need of them later.

I have to admit that it is very hard for me to sit down and write this letter to you. The subject matter of your last letter was such that it pains me to comment on most of what you wrote. Before you jump to the wrong conclusion, please let me explain. While I'm glad that you continue to remember more and more about what your life was like before you left us, it seems as if fate has decided to let you remember so many of the negative things that have happened during the course of our relationship. Don't get me wrong, I recognize the happy times that you have remembered and I'm grateful for that, but most of your rediscovered 'good' memories pale in comparison to the degree that the horrible things that have happened. It is for that reason that I'm upset.

I guess that I mostly speak of the night that I shot you. My hands shake and my stomach tightens whenever I think about that night. A pack of Sabat was making an attempt to take over Salem and they had a Tremere among them named Akari. He performed some kind of ritual that sent many of us into an alternate reality where we took the places of our counterparts there while our doubles came to this reality. You and Rafe were switched first and I remember how scared I was that I would never see either of you again. It was a very stressful time for everyone involved.

You had just arrived in Salem yourself and by the time you were

BRENDA THOMPSON-BROWN

385 ELM STREET SALEM, MA 01970

found missing Jason had finally made his way here from the Holding where the two of you had just seen each other for the first time in two years. He was as frantic to find out what had happened to you as I was. Perhaps this will help you understand why he is so worry about this situation that we now find ourselves in.

Luckily we found the two of you as soon as my adopted child Bruce, Cormac Brennan and Nina Rodriguez, and I were switched as well. In order to get help from some of the people in that world, we had to agree to take care of the master of the city that would then open the door to the leadership there and allow the person we were seeking help from to take over the city. It was during that encounter that you were shot.

I don't know exactly what you remember but I won't make excuses for myself. I should have never sent you over there even though it seemed like a good idea at the time. It's a difficult situation for me to write about. If you have any further questions about what happen that night I would prefer to talk about things either in person or over the phone. Maybe you could call me if my explanation isn't adequate.

The argument on the stairway that you remember took place while we were in that alternate reality also. You tend to have little patience at times and as a result of that you tend to go rushing into things without thinking first of your safety. We argued when I questioned your brashness and when you showed me your gun I felt a little better about how prepared you were in enter a possible hostile situation.

It was only your safety that I worried about and to be honest, I would do it again if I thought you needed reminding of it. And it's not me trying to be your mother. That is a story that I will save for another time, maybe when you need a good laugh.

In hindsight, this quality shows your passionate nature and is something I need to be a little more forthcoming in accepting. I will try to do better in the future.

I believe the argument over Jason and Luke took place in Nashville, I'm not totally sure. I remember your resignation that Jason was dead after you returned from Russia without him and I remembered how you seemed to turn to Luke for support. I knew that you were vulnerable,

BRENDA THOMPSON-BROWN

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both emotionally and psychologically, and I truly feel that Luke was taking advantage of the situation even though you might not agree if you remember the entire situation. He understood just as much as the rest of us who know you well enough just how you felt about Jason so his actions seemed very inappropriate. I don't know if Lena feels the same as I do, but I guess that is a mute point considering that you probably don't remember anything about her anyway.

Enough with the bad, let's get on with the good. You're right, dear sister, I did trust you with a great deal, otherwise I would never have opened my home to you and yours in the first place. Upon receiving your last letter I checked my hiding place and found that the pin from Michael was exactly where we had agreed that you would put it the day of my wedding. Even though you don't remember, I really appreciate that you were there for me that day.

As I sit here, remembering the days that we exchanged vows with the men that we love, I am struck again by how different we are in many ways and how alike we are in others. Since Lena offered the use of her manor to you, you decided to go with a very traditional wedding while I opted for a more modern affair on the beach here in Salem.

You glowed the day you married Jason. I've never seen you happier and it did my heart good to see it. I feel blessed that you recall that day and my part in it. The other people that were there in the room with us were Lena and Nina Rodriguez, a Tremere you met through Cormac when you still lived in Las Vegas. I haven't talked to Nina since your recent memory loss but I am sure if she knew she would want to help in any way she could. If you want and when you are ready, I'll help you contact her if you don't have her number.

Please know that I will say no more of you coming home to Salem. You have your reasons for staying in Detroit and I know that they are important to you. The invitation remains open so feel free to take it when you are ready.

I hope that I have done my best to answer any questions you have on your recently regained memories. I would like to continue to rebuild our relationship as well and I hope that we continue to contact each other in any way you feel comfortable with.

I'm afraid that I must go for now. I hope to hear from you again soon.  
Brenda

BRENDA THOMPSON-BROWN

385 ELM STREET SALEM, MA 01970

When I looked up from the letter, I found Scott sitting next to me. I smiled at him as I folded the letter and put it away. I don't know if he'd been reading along with me, but it honestly didn't matter either way. The only thing that might have upset him was the reference to Jason, but that part of my life was over now. I gave Scott a quick kiss and suggested we go play pool.

# Dark Magic

EVERYONE I KNOW IS FIGHTING TO GET BACK WHAT THEY HAD. I'M FIGHTING BECAUSE I DON'T KNOW HOW TO DO ANYTHING ELSE.

BATTLESTAR GALLACTICA: VALLEY OF DARKNESS

Scott's arms were a safe circle around me as he guided my hands on the pool cue. I could smell the musky scent of his skin and wanted nothing more than to forget about the pointers he was giving me and spend the next few hours in our room upstairs. Even as the thought ran through my mind his hand tightened on my skin. I turned my head and felt the rough stubble on his cheek against my face. He made a sound deep in his throat that could have been a purr or a growl, but either way I knew he was thinking the same way I was.

The spell was broken when Frasier called my name. As one Scott and I turned to see that Cormac and Brenda were being led across the bar by my ghoul. We turned back to the table and carefully made the shot we'd been in the middle of before straightening. Thankfully, Scott didn't move away from me and I was able to lean into his strength. I didn't know if Jason had said anything to Christina's family about the argument we'd had, but I wasn't going to try and hide my choices now.

I allowed myself only a moment of leaning on Scott before moving away to meet the others. Scott followed close behind me, and we met them near the middle of the pub. Brenda was overdressed, as usual, but Cormac seemed to have made the effort to dress more casually.

"Glad you could make it," I said with a smile as we reached them. "It's good to see you again."

"Thank you for having us," Brenda replied.

"I thought that we could go upstairs," I suggested. "For privacy."

Madelynne and Logan joined us as we turned to head for the back room. After a moment of polite greetings, we proceeded upstairs with Frasier and Petor trailing behind.

I sat next to Scott on one of the couches and the boys settle near us. Brenda sat in a chair, while Cormac took up an entire sofa when he placed two bags on the cushion beside him. Logan relaxed in his usual chair with Madelynne perched on the arm.

"How is Rafe?" Madelynne asked politely.

"He is fine," Brenda replied. "Busy."

"He didn't come with you?" I asked, not really surprised.

"No," she told me. "We decided it would be best if just the two of us made his trip."

"Down to business, shall we?" Mac asked after a moment of awkward silence. "Brenda, I and a few others in Salem have taken it upon ourselves to seek out some solutions to your amnesia."

I looked down at my hands to hide the flash of anger I felt at their resolve that I needed fixing, but it passed quickly. They were supposed to be family, after all, and it was only natural that they would want their sister healed. Honestly I did have a problem with my memory and a part of me wanted it taken care of just as they did.

"Granted, we have not performed any of the rituals that we have found," he continued, "nor have we ceased our endeavors to find others, but we have found two rituals that we believe would work to return your memory. Both of them are, however, questionable in their ethics."

I struggled to understand what he was saying. They'd found two rituals to restore my memory, not one, but neither of them the ideal solution. "What do you mean questionable?"



"One of them is a voodoo ritual," he told me. "The other is a dark thaumaturgy."

From what little information I could remember, voodoo was often painted with a blacker brush than it deserved. While it could be bloody and bad, it most often was not that bad. "Voodoo can be bad," I stated, "but what's 'dark thaumaturgy'?"

"As you know the Tremere's principle discipline is thaumaturgy," he began. "Our Sabbat brethren practice a less desirable version of it, often to bad results. There was a Sabbat attack in Salem a year ago which included a dark thaumaturge. We confiscated his belongings after he was... dealt with."

"But you think that both of these rituals would work?" I asked.

"I'm almost certain the dark thaumaturgy one would," he told me. "The voodoo one is more generic, but I believe it would produce results as well."

I turned to Brenda. "What do you think?"

"While I agree with Cormac that the black thaumaturgy ritual is the better of the two," she said hesitantly, "I personally cannot allow this ritual to be done because of what is required."

"What's required that is so bad?" Madelynne asked.

"The eyes of the Seer," she replied, "who is Rafe's sister. There is only one Seer in every generation."

Madelynne frowned. "Are there more than one around at a time?"

"Because it is a mage ability, we don't now for sure," Brenda admitted.

"Is it possible that there is another one we could use so she wouldn't be injured?" she asked.

Brenda shook her head. "I don't know."

"There only exists one at a time," Cormac put in. "The next may be born, if this one is destined to, well, not to live a full life. However this ritual does not require that she be killed, just her eyes."

"We can re-grow things," Madelynne pointed out. "Can she grow them back if she's a mage?"

"I asked that same question among the Kindred in Salem," Brenda answered, "and everyone is under the impression that she would lose her sight."

"You said bad things could happen," I asked Cormac. "What kind of things?"

"Well, most of the dark thaumaturgy rituals are for an evil intent," he replied. "Even if you intend no evil, are there still consequences to the caster."

Madelynne seemed surprised. "And there's someone willing to risk it?"

He looked at me. "Should Tina wish this ritual done, yes."

I tell by the look in his eyes that he would do this for me, risk his own sanity for my sake if I asked him to. I didn't understand his loyalty to me when I barely remembered who he was.

"What about the other ritual?"

"The voodoo ritual is more generic in its outcome," he explained. "The ingredients, while not as specific, are a little more extreme. It requires the heart of an infant."

Madelynne looked as disgusted as I felt and she silently shook her head no, though I hadn't needed her opinion to know I would never do something to harm a child. "As much as I'd like to have my memory back, I don't want it that bad."

"As you wish," Cormac murmured.

"There probably are ways around killing a child isn't there?" Madelynne pointed out.

"I believe that obtaining it another way is possible," Brenda agreed. "I don't want to kill a child for this any more than you do, but I feel that there are some loopholes."

To my surprise, Petor spoke up. "Do you have to kill the infant for this, or do you just need the heart?"

"It just requires the heart," she replied without looking at him.

"How can you take the heart without killing?" Madelynne asked.

"There are children who die every day," Brenda pointed out. "If you have the correct connections it is possible to obtain these things, much like many of your Tremere and Ventrue obtain blood without hunting."

"I know a guy..." Petor began hesitantly.

"You know a guy...?" I prompted when he didn't say anything more.

In Russian, he said, "He can get things."

"Baby hearts?" I asked in the same language.

He shrugged. "Maybe."

"What kind of money?"

"I haven't seen him in a while," he replied.

Abruptly I realized that no one else in the room understood what we were saying. "He knows a guy that might be able to get a baby's heart," I said in English.

"And how would he know such a gentleman?" Brenda demanded belligerently, and just as quickly backed down. "I'm sorry, that was none of my business."

"The Russian military is not all that honest," he told her, "especially those that served under communism."

She looked at him for the first time. "I take it that you have begun to regain some of your memories as well?"

"I remember everything from before I met her," he reminded her.

"I see."

"What else is in this ritual that is questionable?" I asked, turning the topic away from Petor's past and memories.

Cormac opened the smaller of the two bags by his side and pulled out a case from which he removed a piece of parchment. He stood and brought it to me. I read aloud the list of ingredients quickly, stumbling over the cat placentas, which Madelynne immediately objected to.

"How easy would this stuff be to get?" I asked.

Cormac answered me. "We have not really looked for the ingredients."

"How likely is it that you'll come across a ritual that isn't quite as disgusting?"

"These rituals, because of their less than upstanding ethical values, were easier to find as the dark side is often more tempting and more readily available," he replied. "I believe something may else eventually show up."

"But if you recall, the ritual that began this process wasn't happy either," Brenda pointed out. "What we're dealing with here is serious. Ritual work, even for mages, has a certain cost. As Cormac has already stated, the search continues."

"Are there any repercussions of the voodoo ritual?" Madelynne asked.

"Aside from the heart of the infant," Cormac told her, "there is none, only to the conscience."



She looked at me. "This is up to you. In good conscience I could not participate in this, but it's your choice. The voodoo one, depending on how you got the heart, you might always wonder if a baby died for your memory. If you could find a seer that wasn't Rafe's sister, the other ritual might be better. Do you need both eyes?" she asked Cormac.

He nodded.

"When's the next moon in Aries?" I asked, as that was one of the requirements of the voodoo ritual.

"Two weeks," Cormac answered.

"The sixth of December would be the following one," Brenda added, "then January third."

"I think you should take some time to think this over," Madelynne suggested. "Maybe in that time something else can be found. They did find these two in a rather short time, maybe if you give it some more time they will find another."

"Okay." I looked at Brenda. "If a better one isn't found by December can we get the ingredients by January?"

"I'm sure something can be arranged," she replied.

I nodded my agreement. "Hopefully something better will come up."

"As you wish," Cormac repeated.

"I appreciate you first of all bringing these rituals and second being honest about them," I told them both.

Cormac seemed confused. "Why would we be anything but?"

I shrugged. "I'm not saying you would be, but you could have done one of them and not said anything."

In the awkward silence that followed, Brenda asked about my studies. Madelynne interrupted long enough to offer refreshments before excusing herself and Logan.

I made sure to thank Brenda for the ritual bag she had sent with Jason and we talked for a while about my successes or lack of them with Thaumaturgy. Since Scott was still sitting next to me, we didn't go into any details, but they assured me that my abilities would come back with time. I hoped they were right.

Since we were talking about thaumaturgy, I made sure to ask about the ritual that had created Frasier's necklace.

"I haven't done it," Cormac admitted, "but it is fairly common." When I asked how to do it, he explained that it was still beyond my abilities and suggested I continue to practice the Incantation of the Shepherd, as it would allow me to find both Petor and Frasier. "There are a few rituals that have been performed on Frasier and on his behalf that near as I can tell are still in effect," he added.

I looked at Frasier, confused, but my ghoul simply shrugged. "What are you talking about?" I asked Cormac.

"The Curse Belated," he explained. "It allows you to transfer a certain amount of your blood into him that he cannot use and does not dissipate with time. Should he die, that blood would ensure his embrace and he would awaken Kindred, Tremere."

"You can do that?" I asked, amazed. "I did that?"

"Yes," he confirmed. "There is also a ritual allows a Kindred to transfer certain amounts of his vitae to an object for later use."

"Like the cross," I murmured.

"Yes, however that one is also beyond your ability at the moment," he told me.

When I realized that he wasn't going to tell me anything more, I changed the subject and asked about some of the memories I had gotten back. They answered my questions the best they could, and added little things about those instances that they thought might help me understand them.

I noticed that Brenda's eyes took in everything about the interaction between Scott and me. We weren't being overly affectionate in any way, but it was the pack way to have close physical contact with each other and I could tell she didn't like it. She didn't have to say anything, her eyes judged us in silence.

Eventually it was time to go. Scott and I were to drive them back to the airport, but I wanted to talk to Brenda a little more while we still had time. I started to hand the keys to Scott so I could sit with Brenda in the back, but at the look on her face I stopped in mid gesture. Cormac prevented any discomfiture by asking to drive as he wanted to stop somewhere on the way to the airport.

"Have you talked to Jason?" Brenda asked as soon as we were on our way.

Cormac took that moment to turn up the radio, something I was grateful for. Scott had barely stopped growling when Jason's name came up.

"I haven't heard from him since we argued in Flint," I admitted softly. "I don't expect to. Have you heard from him?" I didn't want to see Jason, but I was worried about how he was taking our break up.

"We had a brief conversation," she told me, but seemed reluctant to say anything more.

I let the subject drop and asked Cormac where we were going.

"Dark Side of the Moon," he said cryptically.

Leaning up to talk in Scott's ear, I asked where that was.

"Downtown," he answered. "It's a new age shop."

I let my hand linger on his shoulder as I sat back and once again I felt Brenda's eyes judging me. Ignoring her displeasure, I brought up some of the memories I'd gotten that we hadn't talked about yet.

Cormac knew Maleficent, the owner of the Dark Side of the Moon. He went into the back of the shop with her while the rest of us perused the store. The front of the store was your typical Goth new age shop, while the back was brighter lit, and looked much more legitimate. Mac had gone into a private area where the door was marked 'Invitation Only'.

When Cormac returned, he introduced Brenda to his friend, and she also spent some time in the private room with Maleficent while Scott and I shopped. I had only a brief introduction to the woman as we paid for our purchases, then we were off to the airport.

Despite all the awkward moments during the evening and the judgments I knew they had passed on me, we hugged when we said our goodbyes at the plane. I knew that no matter what happened when I got my memory back, no one from Christina's life was going to be happy with my choices. Yet if I did what they wanted me to, I wouldn't be happy with myself.

As Scott drove us away I laid my head on his shoulder and let myself be comforted by his presence. No matter what choice I made in January, I knew that Scott and the pack would support me one hundred percent. They trusted my judgment, and I hoped I wouldn't let them down.

"Somehow I think they were disappointed," I whispered. "I think they expected me to beg forgiveness for my sins." When he chuckled a little, I began to relax. "I'm not sure what they're

going to do when I get my memory back," I continued. "They probably think I'll come running back to Salem and that's not going to happen." I lifted my head to look up at him. "I'm happy right where I am," I told him.

He put his arm around me and smiled. "Me too."

*"I must be going," Cormac said as he reluctantly began gathering his things.*

*"I hope we can spend some time together when you return," I told him. "I believe we have a few things to talk about."*

*I walked him to the door, noting that he'd reverted to the distant man I'd first met. I wasn't sure how I felt about the connection between us, and I was sure he was as confused as I felt. We stood there for a moment in awkward silence. He made a gesture that could have been anything, then finally nodded at me. I smiled, knowing exactly how he felt.*

*He walked down the steps and to his car. When he was settled in the driver's seat, he looked over and saw me still standing in the open doorway. He touched two lips to his fingers and I closed my eyes against the affection in the gesture. I gave him a small wave and backed into the house, closing the door and leaning against it feeling exhausted.*

*"Brenda," I commented as I hung the clothes up on the bar inside the walk-in closet, "I expected you back a few minutes ago."*

*I came out of the closet and saw Brenda leaning against the door looking stunned. There was a dreamy look on her face. "What?" When she didn't answer me, I waived a hand in front of her eyes. "What?"*

*That brought her out of it. "What? I'm sorry," she whispered.*

*"What's with the 'oh my God' look on your face?" I asked.*

*She still seemed a little out of it. "Do Kindred get married?"*

*I wasn't sure I'd heard her right. "What?"*

*"Do we get married?"*

*I shook my head, frowning. "I don't know, Brenda. Long term relationships, maybe? I don't know." I considered it for a moment. "I don't see why we couldn't."*

*"Who would marry us?" she whispered absently.*

*I studied her face closely. "Why, did he ask you to marry him?"*

*She nodded slowly. "Yeah, kind of," she breathed. "I think."*

*"You think? Girl, either he did or he didn't," I told her.*

*"Well," she said thoughtfully, "he said that he liked the sound of Mrs. Brown."*

## New Beginnings

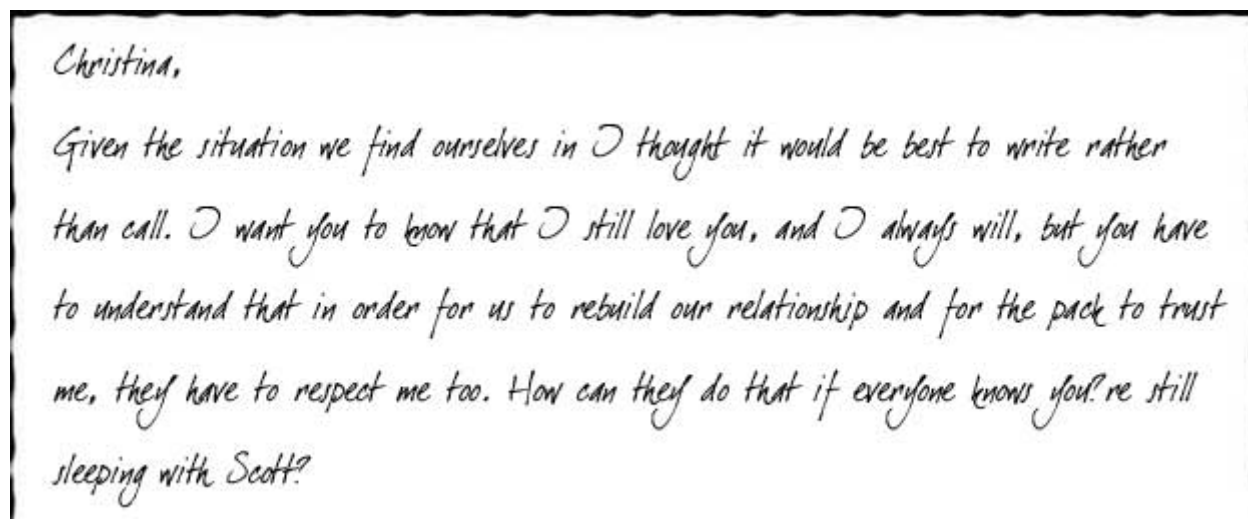
AND U WILL UNDERSTAND

THE SHADOWS IN MY HEART

JEWEL - HAUNTED

I woke in Scott's arms. Without opening my eyes I breathed in the scent of him and smiled. Since he was always awake long before I was, it wasn't often I woke to find him with me and I savored the sensation of his body against mine.

Madelynne waited until Scott had left for work to tell me that a letter had come from Jason. I flinched when I saw that it was addressed to Christina Kline, but agreed when she suggested I read it in an out of the way booth. She sat with me as I opened the envelope and began reading.

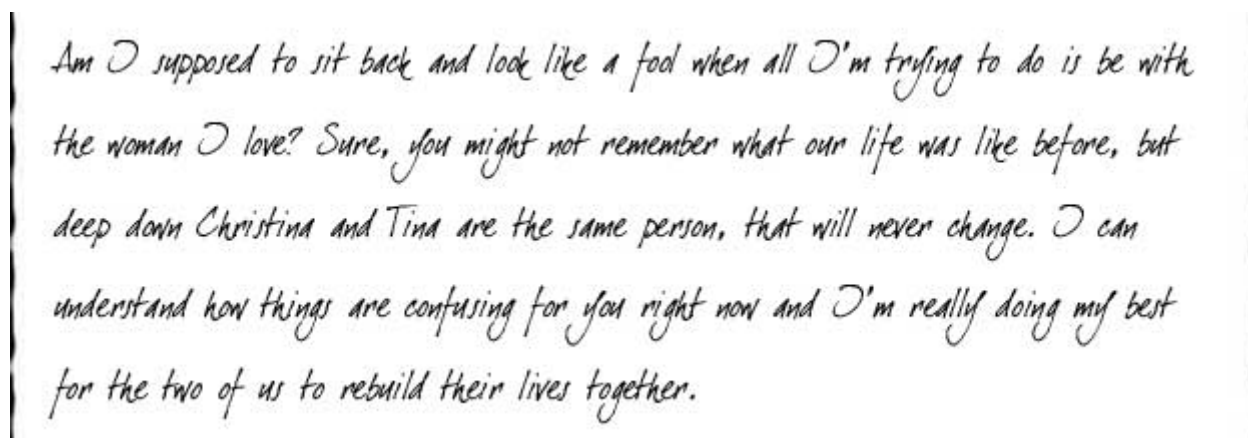


A photograph of a handwritten letter on lined paper, enclosed in a black rectangular border. The handwriting is in cursive. The letter is addressed to Christina and discusses the challenges of rebuilding a relationship and the pack's trust.

Christina,

Given the situation we find ourselves in I thought it would be best to write rather than call. I want you to know that I still love you, and I always will, but you have to understand that in order for us to rebuild our relationship and for the pack to trust me, they have to respect me too. How can they do that if everyone knows you're still sleeping with Scott?

Right, because him running off and pouting rather than coming to town and trying to win me back reflected so highly on him. I wasn't sure why he thought that the pack should respect him when he didn't seem to care about me.



A photograph of a handwritten letter on lined paper, enclosed in a black rectangular border. The handwriting is in cursive. The letter continues the previous one, expressing frustration and a commitment to rebuilding their lives together.

Am I supposed to sit back and look like a fool when all I'm trying to do is be with the woman I love? Sure, you might not remember what our life was like before, but deep down Christina and Tina are the same person, that will never change. I can understand how things are confusing for you right now and I'm really doing my best for the two of us to rebuild their lives together.

The way he was choosing to help rebuild our relationship was by not being with me. I wanted to stop reading right there, but I had to know what else he had to say. I wondered for a moment if Talon had been there when he'd wrote the letter, dictating what Jason had written.

*This is the hardest letter that I've ever written and I don't want to hurt you, but you have to understand that relationships have to be equal and ours can't be if you won't give me a real chance.*

A real chance? What had he done to deserve one, walk away? Find a new ghoul within days of leaving Detroit? Hell, I hadn't even made up my mind about our relationship when he'd bound the girl to him. It made me wonder if Sarah had been waiting on the side lines all along.

*The ball is in your court now. If you want, I will come to Detroit for the weekend to see how things go but I won't come if you're still in a relationship with Scott.*

I passed the letter across the table to Madelynne without finishing it. I hadn't liked his ultimatum when he'd given it to me in Flint, and I sure as hell didn't like it now. If he wanted to be with me as badly as he claimed, he wouldn't be demanding, he'd be pleading.

I didn't regret choosing Scott over Jason. What I did regret was that I would never know what my choice might have been if Jason hadn't forced me to choose so soon. I would never know if Christina's love for him had been true or if it was just a physical attraction that kept going to my head.

Regardless of the love I once felt and could possibly have felt for him again, Jason was not who I belonged with. True love could not conquer all, not this time.

The letter only confirmed that I had made the right decision. Jason would never accept me for who and what I was, yet Scott had accepted me without question. Jason would always long for his Christina, Scott didn't care if I ever remembered who I had been. Jason didn't trust my judgment, but Scott always had. Jason would never accept Petor, never trust him, Scott did.

"What do you think of this?" Madelynne asked when she'd read the letter.

I looked at her sadly. "I think that he'll never accept me for who I am."

"What if you get your memory back?" she countered. "I realize that's not going to change who you are, but...."

"Like you said, I'm not who I was, even if I do remember everything."

"What are you gonna do?" When I didn't answer, she added, "What do you want to do?"

"Nothing," I said simply. "No matter what happens, he will always look at me and wish I was her. I can't live like that."

She seemed surprised. "You're not gonna call or write back?"

"He said the ball was in my court," I reminded her. "Let's let sleeping dogs lie."

"You're going to close that chapter of your life and move on, right?"

I smiled, certain that I was doing the right thing. "Scott accepts me for who I am. I don't need anything else."

"Are you ready to move on with a new relationship with Scott, and make the break with Jason final?" she asked. "I mean you are married to him. Was it a legal marriage? I don't mean to imply

that you and Scott are going to get married, but I think that if you two are going to be in a relationship that past ties should be cut so that you can move forward as a couple if that is where you want to go."

"I have no idea if it was legal or not," I admitted, "but I think it's irrelevant either way. I'm already in a relationship with Scott, you know? Of course, I have no idea where that's going."

"I guess that would be something that you should talk to him about," she suggested. "Has he said anything about your marriage to Jason?"

I smiled wryly. "He's just barely stopped growling when anything relating to Jason is brought up."

She very nearly laughed, but somehow managed to contain her amusement. "Maybe you should just ask where he wants the relationship to go or something like that. You know, one night stand, a really long one, or a real relationship."

"Yeah, I know what you mean," I told her, "but Madelynne, Scott... he's not exactly the 'let's talk about it' kind of guy. And actually I'm surprised he's gotten as serious about me as he has. I think we've gotten a bit past the 'one night stand' phase."

"You might be right," she agreed, "but I would want to know where I stood if I were you. I'm not sure I could go on not knowing where the hell I stood with someone."

I shook my head. "Honestly I don't think it matters. I'm happy just knowing that he doesn't expect me to change into his idea of the perfect woman. He likes me the way I am, Madelynne, and that is so important to me. Every night I get of that is more than I ever had before. Even if he ended it tomorrow, I'd be damned happy I had it for as long as I did."

"Well, maybe you are his idea of a perfect woman," she told me, "and I highly doubt that it would end tomorrow or even the next day."

I smiled again. "Me too. I just hope I don't do anything to fuck it up."

"Why would you say that?" she demanded.

"I think Christina fucked up more than her share of things," I said with a shrug as I looked away, "relationships included."

"Well, you are now Tina Andrews, not Christina," she reminded me firmly. "A completely different person than you were before. Besides you have the rest of us here to make sure that you don't screw up!"

I hoped she was right. I hoped that no matter what happened with my memory I would still be happy here, with the pack as my family, with Scott as my lover. Yet a voice in my head kept telling me that if I did remember Christina's life it would ruin everything I had.

As the night wore on I began to wonder if I had agreed to the ritual Cormac and Brenda had brought only to appease them, to atone in some way for breaking up with Jason. I didn't like the thought of that. It made me start to rethink my stand on regaining Christina's memories.

When Scott came in hours later, the news of my letter from Jason had already run through the pack, and I overheard Maggie telling him about it. He didn't say anything to me about it, and perhaps it was my imagination, but I felt as if he was weighing my actions the rest of the night, even after we went upstairs to my room. Only then did he talk about Jason.

"So you left him for me," he murmured as he watched me undress in the dim light of the bedside lamp. He looked so sensual lying there on the dark sheets, like a big cat ready to spring.

I smiled and turned away to lay the last of my clothes on a chair. "You could say that."

"I think I just did," he murmured.

"You'd be right." I walked toward the bed, enjoying the look in his eye as he watched me.

He moved over to give me room on the bed beside him. "Any particular reason?"

I sat on the edge of the bed and looked down at him. There was so much I could say to answer his question, but in the end it boiled down to one simple truth. "Jason just wanted Christina."

"But Tina's much more fun," he answered with a knowing smile.

"Glad you think so," I grinned back at him. I ran a hand across his chest, enjoying the thickness of his hair beneath my fingers. "I think so too."

Much later, as I lay in his arms waiting for dawn to claim us, I thought how silly it was to worry about regaining memories of my past. Nothing I could remember would be worth losing what I had right here, right now.

# *Brenda's Pain*

HEADS YOU WIN AND TAILS I'M LOST

LOVE EQUALS PAIN

JEWEL - GRAY MATTER

Brenda visited Detroit one more time before things fell apart between us. Scott wasn't real happy with the idea of me spending an evening with her, but he knew it was important to me, so he didn't argue too much. Frasier and Petor were going to go with us to dinner, as Brenda would be bringing Rafe.

Frasier was okay with the meeting. Rafe had been his friend when we'd lived in Salem, and he did his best to assure Petor that everything would be fine. The rest of the pack expressed some concerns as well, but when Maddy seemed okay with it, they accepted the visit without further questions.

We met at a local chain restaurant so the boys could have a late dinner. The boys and I were sitting at a table when Brenda and Rafe came in, and I could see the hesitation in his face as they approached.

Though the visit started a bit awkwardly, it warmed up soon enough. Frasier did his best to make sure everyone got along, and the conversation began to flow around the table. Brenda and I talked about her visit with Maleficent earlier in the evening while the boys talked about friends Frasier had made in Salem.

Brenda admitted that she'd been working quite hard, searching for a cure to my memory loss. While I appreciated that she cared for her sister enough to continue to try and bring her back, I didn't want her to driver herself crazy on my behalf.

"Brenda, I understand that you want to help me," I told her gently, "but realistically, I'm doing fine. We're still a go for that ritual in January, don't you think that it will work?"

"You don't remember this, but I try to cover every base. I know you're fine," she said with a catch in her voice. "Let's change the subject. I can't even explain to myself why I feel this need to know everything I can."

"Just be careful you don't overextend yourself," I told her seriously. "I appreciate that you care about me, but I'm not broken. Everything will be all right, in time."

She smiled reassuringly. "You're right, as always."

My laughter was a dry noise that sounded strange even to my ears. "I'm sure I'm not always right, Brenda. There are things just since I woke up here that I know I've done wrong, but I can't go back and change them now."

"None of us is perfect." I could tell my words had bothered her, but she was less concerned about hiding it from me than from Rafe. "I just wish that things hadn't happened the way they did."

I shrugged, trying to keep how I felt about the situation from showing on my face. In a way I was glad things had happened the way they did simply because I was with Scott and not Jason. "We can't change it now, Brenda. There's no use wishing for the 'might-have-been's." I smiled, trying to lighten things up. "It could have been worse, you know? At least we have this time together, to get to know each other again. That's good, right?"

She nodded and laughed a little. "At least we aren't yelling anymore, or trying to kill each other. Have you talked to Antonio?"



We talked for a while about my communications with her sire, and how the pack was doing. She seemed confused as to why Frasier would agree to working in a factory until I explained that we hadn't really had many other options since we needed the money.

"I know Frasier hates it, but Petor doesn't mind so much. I think as long as he has his hands on something related to an engine, he's happy," I told her with a smile. "I'm sure everything will be fine once we get the business up and running. At least we have a building now, and some financing, until things take off."

"I don't understand why you need the money," she asked in surprise. "What happened to it all?"

I shrugged, not really understanding why it was such an issue. "We only had about five grand, but the SUV took most of that. We're still doing okay, though. The loan came through and the guys are pulling in pretty good money. It's not like we have to pay rent at the pub."

"That's all the money you had?" she asked, obviously still reeling. "No, that can't be right. Last I knew your accounts nearly matched mine. You fronted half the cash for the agency. Where did it go?" She seemed to be talking to herself than to me. "Did that bastard take that, too?"

"What the hell are you talking about?" I demanded. "What bastard?"

She explained that when I was in Salem I'd had a number of investments and bank accounts that amounted to a fair sum of money, not to mention the investment into Rafe's business. She thought perhaps the documentation had gotten lost when they'd sent my things. She wasn't sure if I would still be able to access the money even though I had Christina's identification. "You are legally married to Jason still and that he might have claim over how those funds are mandated. Of course, there is the chance that when Malcolm took your memory, he somehow managed to seize those funds."

After a moment's hesitation, she added, "If you would like to give me power of attorney, I could look into the accounts and see what's there and do with them what you would like."

I sat there stunned for just a moment, trying to take it all in. I doubted that Malcolm would care about anything as trivial as money, I actually thought her other concern might have more weight. "Jason never said anything to me about money like what you're talking about. Do you think he, I don't know, kept it? He was pretty angry with me the last time I saw him."

"I don't think he would do that," she said quickly. "Honestly I don't. If anything he didn't say anything to protect you because he didn't know what you were going to do." She thought for a moment, then shrugged. "Maybe he didn't think about it. You have been living with these people here and they seem to have been taking care of you. When was the last you actually talked to him?"

I looked down at my water glass, thinking about the last time I'd seen him. "A couple of weeks ago," I said softly. "Madelynnne has been taking care of me, but I need to take care of myself, Brenda. I can't expect to live off the charity of others, and I have the guys to think about. I don't need much, but they have to eat, you know?"

"I'm sorry that I didn't think of it sooner, but I've been preoccupied with other matters," she replied. "Do you intend to contact Jason again? Do you want me to look into it for you or do you want to talk to him about it?"

"My financial status isn't your responsibility, Brenda," I told her as gently as I could. "I don't know if I should call Jason. Like I said, he was pretty angry with me the last time I saw him. I really don't think he'll want to talk to me right now."

"I want to help," she said earnestly. "I know you don't really trust me, I probably wouldn't either if I was you, but doesn't the fact that I told you about the money make a difference in

anything? I don't know, maybe you should talk to Jason about it. He is your husband and the two of you will have to resolve your relationship sooner or later."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to hurt your feelings, Brenda," I soothed, putting my hand on hers. "I know you want to help me, and I don't mind that, I just don't want you to feel like you have to take care of me. I'm a big girl." I pulled my hand away and tried to hide my unease. "However, I would appreciate it if you would talk to Jason about the finances. I think he might take it wrong if I called him right now."

Her hand followed mine and covered it where it lay on the table. "I'll talk to him. He might want to speak with you though, what am I suppose to tell him?"

I didn't want to admit that I wasn't ready to call Jason yet, that I would probably never call him. I was happy right where I was, and if I talked to Jason, he might convince me to give him another go, and that was the last thing I wanted. Finally I smiled at her sadly. "Tell him what you think is best, Brenda."

The rest of the dinner passed pleasantly. Though Rafe seemed a little distant, he warmed up quickly to Frasier's easy manner. Petor seemed hesitant as well, and I hoped that everything would work out between the three of them. They planned to visit the Zombie Zoo after dinner, while Brenda and I spent some time alone.

We shopped for a while, and went hunting before heading over to the agency, where the boys were supposed to meet us. On the way I shared some of the plans we'd made, told her how good Petor was with mechanical stuff, and how Frasier had the weapons down pat. Scott and Alex would provide the muscle, while Emily and me would add a touch of elegance to the staff. We planned to focus on mortal society to begin with, but after we proved ourselves we hoped to work our way into Kindred society.

"I'm sure that Elvira or Cormac would speak up for your work in Salem," she told me.

"I guess I hadn't thought about that." I shrugged, not sure if it mattered. "I really wanna make my own way. I mean, there's no telling what Ch—I mean, I feel the need to prove myself, if only to myself."

"It's okay to use the resources you have, you know," she suggested carefully. "You have the ability to do a good job but sometimes you need help getting your foot in the door."

I looked away, unable to meet her eyes. "What if I don't have the abilities you think I do? What if they're gone with my memory? No, it's better if I don't get help. That way if I fail, no one can say anyone told them I'd do any different."

She looked sad, but didn't say anything more on the subject.

As we approached the building, I told her about the neighborhood, and the building itself. We still needed to do some work before we could open, and that was apparent when I opened the doors and turned on the light.

We had cleaned the building up fairly well, and laid some chalk lines on the floor where we wanted to build some walls for office space and a conference room on the main floor. The second floor had lines marking where Petor's apartment would be along with a room I could use as a haven if I needed it. The third and fourth floors were still empty.

I think Brenda honestly tried to see the potential in the building, and the business I was trying to build, but I knew she was disappointed that I was planning on staying in Detroit. We sat in the office area for a while, talking about people from Christina's life.

"I wonder what it would be like, remembering," I murmured. "I mean, I know I remember bits and pieces now, but to remember it all? Even the idea seems strange."

She smiled reassuringly. "I would think it would be a relief to know again. I can't imagine not knowing what my life was like, not remembering. Even if it meant listening to stories of what my life was like from those who knew me. If that was all I had it would be enough."

My smile was a sad one. "You're wrong, Brenda. It's not enough. It's like being blind from birth and listening to someone describe a color. I can't feel it, can't taste it, can't see it. I suppose I'm lucky that I remember anything, but I don't think hearing about the past will ever be enough."

"What if it's all you get?" she asked softly.

I shrugged. "Then I guess I'll keep on as have been. I may never regain the past, but there is always the future." When she nodded, I added with a more genuine smile, "And I'm happy where I am, whether you believe it or not. Madelynne and Logan, all of them really, are very good people. We take care of each other, all of us. The boys fit in well, and they seem to like it there too. And Scott, well, I know you probably don't approve, but we get on well enough."

She stood and paced for a minute as if thinking about what she was about to say very carefully. "I'm trying really hard to not see the similarities in what you just said to how we lived together in Salem." She stopped at the window and looked out. "It's like I'm watching a play for the second time. The roles are the same, it's just different actors."

"So what, am I doomed to just keep repeating the same shit over and over? To just keep losing my memory again like dust in the wind?" I asked dryly. "I wonder what I ever did that was bad enough to deserve this."

Her laugh was brittle enough to break as it bounced across the room. "When are you going to get it and realize that none of this is your fault?" she asked as she looked at me. "It was never your fault; Jason's embrace, Lena's abduction, Malcolm tricking you into leaving the house that night. It isn't your fault and you keep pinning it on yourself like you have no self worth. Don't you know how insane this whole thing is?" She walked back to me and laid a hand on my cheek. "You are one of the most precious things in my life and it kills me the way that you look at yourself. You are so special, Ch-"

She broke off abruptly, and I was glad she did. It was hard, hearing her talk so affectionately about the woman I no longer was.

"Can you hear yourself, Brenda?" I asked softly. "You should take a piece of your own advice. Christina chose to go after Malcolm, there was nothing you could do to stop her." I stopped for a moment, shaking my head at my inability to admit that I was Christina. "To stop me. You said it yourself, I'm headstrong and I don't think things through. It wasn't your fault, stop blaming yourself."

"You misunderstand," she replied, looking away. "I know it isn't my fault. I know who is to blame here."

I studied the lines of her face for a moment. "Malcolm. You blame Malcolm."

She stood and moved toward the window. "He is the one that caused everything, isn't he?"

Getting to my feet, I asked, "Is he? To say that he is entirely to blame is like blaming it on the devil. We all have free will, we all have choices. None of us know what happened in Russia. Maybe Christina chose to have her memories erased." I wasn't so sure about that last part, but it was a possibility.

She laughed outright, throwing her head back for a moment before turning to face me. "Let's look at his track record," she said in a hard voice. "First, he abducts Jason and holds him against his will and has him forcibly embraced Nosferatu to boot." As she spoke, she lifted her fingers, counting off Malcolm's sins. "When that fails to get him what he wants, he takes a woman from her bed in the middle of the night and takes her to another dimension, of all things, where she

almost had to give birth to her child by herself. When that plan failed him, he moved on to you. Malcolm has an agenda here that hasn't been fully realized. How can you look at the evidence and even think that you would have wanted to have your memories taken from you? What could you possibly have done to warrant a desire like that?"

"I don't know," I said sadly, "that's the problem. If he's everything you say he is why did Christina go with him in the first place? Why did she help him? Why didn't she just leave him to die? Why didn't he just kill her if he's so evil?"

"He likes to toy with people and like I said, I don't think his plan is fully realized," she insisted. "Supposedly he told Petor that you would be safe in Detroit but I can't help asking why? Maybe there's something about you that can stop him and he wants you out of the way so he can strike again." She turned back to the window and added quietly, "You might be safe, but what about the rest of us who are left? I can't help but wonder who will be next."

I shook my head. "There's no way for me to know the truth unless or until I get my memory back. Are you so worried for your own safety?"

"I know what I have to do to protect myself and what's mine," she said coolly. "I know Malcolm is evil. Nothing will make me think otherwise and I know that anything is possible but I can't conceive the thought that you could do anything that would resemble what he's done. What he's capable of."

"Perhaps when my memory returns, I will share your hatred and fear of Malcolm," I said wryly. "For now, can we agree to change the subject?" When she didn't answer me, I began walking across the room toward her. "Look, I know it seems as if I'm moving on with my new life without regards to the old one." I hesitated for a moment. I had to be honest, that was exactly what I was doing. "Maybe I am, but I want you to know that it's not that I think this life is any more valid than what Ch-I had with you and J-Jason in Salem. It's just that I can't put my entire existence on hold until I remember everything. To be realistic, Brenda, we both know that may never happen."

I reached her side and put a hand on her shoulder. "You all keep telling me that I'm the same person I was, but I don't know if that's true, and honestly you don't either. None of us knows what happened, what essential part of me might have been changed." I let my hand fall away at the thought I'd never admitted until now. I hugged my stomach and turned to look out the window. "Who knows what kinds of horrible things might be planted in my sub-consciousness? What things might have been stripped away? Until I remember what happened—well, let's just say I have to take things one night at a time."

"I miss you," she said sadly, mirroring my stance. "I can't deny that. It's like there's this hole in my life that nothing can fill. Jesus, that sounds pathetic. I love Rafe and I know that I can tell him anything, but it's not the same as having another woman there to talk to. I didn't have siblings growing up; it was just my dad and me. I miss having you there. I know that sounds selfish but that's how I feel."

"Brenda, I'm sorry that this has been so hard on you," I said honestly. "It hasn't been easy for me either, second guessing every decision I've made in the last few weeks. I know that what we had in Salem was my life once, but I don't feel like I can just step back into it like an old pair of shoes." I knew I'd never be able to return to the she wanted me to have, and I knew it hurt her. "I need to prove that I can do this on my own, Brenda. I feel like I've failed at so much, I have to know there is something I can succeed at. Me, Tina Andrews, not Christina Kline. I know that it's hard for you to accept, and I know that it may be selfish of me, but there it is."

"You don't have to prove anything to me," she said with a small smile. "I know you. But I can understand that you need to do something for yourself." She hesitated a moment, then asked, "Have you been studying?"

"I've been trying," I admitted. "Thaumaturgy isn't the easiest thing to learn. I know Cormac had good intentions when he sent me the primer, and I know we talked the last time you were in town, but it seems like for every answer I get I have five questions. My Auspex isn't real reliable either. It's very frustrating. Everyone keeps saying I know this stuff, but it's gone as if I never knew it."

"It's never easy," she assured me. "I don't have the time to work with Howie so Rafe is. It's a good exercise for him. You'll get it. Nothing worth having is easily obtainable, that's what Antonio says."

"But I already had it. It shouldn't come so hard the second time around. It just seems like everything's the hard way." I shook my head ruefully. "Okay, when I start sending out invitations for the pity party, I know it's time to change the subject." A glance at my watch told me our ghouls would be joining us soon. They pulled into the parking lot as if waiting for my cue.

To my surprise, all three of the men agreed that they had enjoyed their visit to the Zombie Zoo. Petor looked unharmed, and Rafe more at ease than he had been when they'd left the restaurant. Frasier took him on a quick tour of the building, and soon after they returned, Brenda said that it was time to go.

I watched them leave not knowing it would be the last time I saw Christina's sister. Unfortunately, the finality of my breakup with Jason proved too much for her to handle, and as time passed we talked less and less.

## *Moving On*

I HAVE MADE SOME BIG MISTAKES

AND I'VE PAID A HEAVY PRICE

I FOUND A LITTLE PEACE BETWEEN WILL AND SACRIFICE

MELISSA ETHERIDGE - I WANT TO BE IN LOVE

As I knew they would, my boys began complaining about living at the pub. I didn't want to agree, but I knew I couldn't keep them close to me forever. Frasier was able to get an apartment in Scott's building, on the same floor but opposite corner. Petor moved into the apartment we'd built for him at the agency and was working on the security system for the entire building and grounds.

By the middle of November Petor had a Lincoln Town Car ready for service, complete with some body armor. The office area of the building was serviceable, although we were still putting the finishing touches on it. We even had a few leads on jobs, but nothing in writing yet.

Frasier had come around once he saw that my relationship with Jason was really over. He seemed to genuinely like Scott, and both of my ghouls fit in well with the pack. Madelynne had taken on two ghouls herself, a married couple that she'd had her eye on for some time. Carolyn Williams worked in the medical supplies field, and her husband Andrew Williams was the investment banker who'd helped me get a loan for the agency. They didn't run with the pack like my boys did, but they came by often.

Patrick and his new girl, Anne, came to the bar every once in a while, doing their best to upset Madelynne's life. Though he talked a lot about being with her again, he never once tried to get her alone. She believed that he didn't really want her back.

Though I saw an occasional Tremere while we were out being sociable, none of them tried to contact me. Every once in a while a stray vampire came into the bar, alone or with a ghoul or two, but it was nothing out of the ordinary.

I did my best to continue my relationships with Brenda and Cormac, and even Antonio. Mostly I contacted them by phone, but after a while I began trying the mental connection that I'd been so opposed to when I'd first woke up in Detroit. It didn't seem to work with Cormac, but Antonio and Brenda were pleased when I initiated contact with them that way.

I'd kept up my attempts at Thaumaturgy every chance I had, although the results weren't reliable. I still hadn't gotten one of the rituals Cormac had sent me to work, and another I'd only gotten to work once. Some nights everything came so easy but most of the time it was like I had some sort of mental block and nothing worked.

Thankfully I'd had some sort of progress with my other Tremere abilities. My Dominate and Auspex were improving a little at a time, enough to give me encouragement, but so slowly that I wound up nearly as frustrated with them as with my Thaumaturgy. Thankfully using my Celerity and Protean abilities came much easier.

Scott and I continued to date, going out several times a week and spending most nights together, either at his apartment or my room at the pub. One night we were walking hand and hand through Greek Town after seeing a movie, talking about the agency and how everything was going.

"I'm surprised you let the boys move out," he commented.

I shrugged. It still bothered me that they weren't sleeping under the same roof but I did my best to hide it. "I can't keep them tied to my apron strings."

"If they'd have let you, you would have," he teased.

"I just want to make sure they're safe," I reminded him.

After a moment, he asked, "What are you going to do?" At my questioning look, he added, "Are you going to stay at the pub?"

"Well, I don't think Frasier would appreciate it if I moved in with him," I drawled with a smile. "He just got the place to himself. And I don't think Petor would like me staying at the agency either. I think he wants to be alone with the car."

He made a noise that might have been a laugh. After a moment, he said, "You could move in with me."

I stopped and looked at him, not sure if he was serious. From the look on his face he was quite serious. "Are you sure that I wouldn't be intruding?" I asked, still a bit stunned from his offer. "I mean, you wouldn't be able to bring girls home anymore."

He smiled. "You're the only girl I bring home."

"I'd really like that," I said with a smile of my own.

"All right then." With a soft tug on my hand he started us walking again.

Later we checked on the boys at the agency, then went to the pub. Scott stayed downstairs talking to Logan while I went upstairs to break the news to Madelynne that I was moving out. She was folding laundry and I sat down to help her while we talked.

"You didn't come all the way over here to help me clean," she said after a few minutes.

"No," I admitted. "Actually I wanted to talk to you." Putting a folded towel on a pile of other towels, I said, "I was thinking about moving out."

She stopped for a moment, surprised. "To where?"

I smiled. "Scott made an offer. I'll be moving in with him tomorrow night, if that's okay."

"Why wouldn't it be?" she grinned as she went back to folding laundry. "I expected that would happen eventually."

"I just don't want you to think that I took advantage of your hospitality," I told her, "or that I'm not grateful you took me in."

"I don't think that at all," she assured me. "The room will always be here for you guys. It's yours and Scott's room now."

"I appreciate that."

She hesitated a moment, then asked, "How are you dealing with the boys being in their separate homes now?"

"I'm getting used to it," I reluctantly admitted. "I'm not sure I like it, but they do."

"They need to have their own lives," she pointed out. "It's only fair you have your own life."

"And speaking of my life, I was thinking I'd like to keep it." When she gave me a questioning look, I added, "I'm going to call Cormac and tell him I don't want them to do the ritual in January."

Once again, she looked surprised. "Really? Why?"

I shrugged. "It's not that important to me. I have a life and I don't want anything from Christina's past getting in the way of that."

"I'm kind of surprised that you've made that decision," she told me. "I wasn't sure you would. I thought you'd probably try and figure a way to make everyone happy."

"I can only make myself happy," I said with a shake of my head. "Brenda's never going to be happy no matter what I do."

"Probably not," she agreed, "but Cormac seems like he'd be fine with any decision you come to."

"I think he would be. He seems to understand better than anyone else what I'm going through."

"When are you going to call?" she asked.

"I thought tonight. Best to get it over with."

Not more than an hour later I made the call. As I'd thought he would, Cormac understood that I was building a new life in Detroit and I didn't want memories and emotions from my old life to ruin it. Thankfully he offered to explain it to Brenda, although he warned me that she probably wouldn't understand. He was right.



## *Visiting*

NOT A GOOD PLACE FOR GOOD GIRLS  
IT'S A PLACE THAT'S FULL OF STRANGERS  
RICKY MARTIN - SAINT TROPEZ

Scott and I had stayed the day at the pub one night in late November when Carissa cornered Madelynne and me in the kitchen. She looked on edge, much more on edge than usual for her. She told us that something strange was going on and led us down to the main room of the pub, where she pointed out a couple sitting in a corner booth.

The woman was probably in her mid thirties, attractive and well groomed without being overdressed in neo hippie clothing. Her hair was pulled back in a loose ponytail, and a burgundy leather bound book sat on the table in front of her. She sipped from a steaming cup while picking at a half eaten sandwich on a plate in front of her. Around her neck was a pendant that was a circle holding a crashing wave inside of it. Something about her seemed familiar, as if I'd seen her somewhere before, but I didn't know where.

The man seemed a little older, more working class. His hair was only a little shorter than Scott's and worn the same way. The long sleeves of his shirt were rolled up to the elbow, and his worn jeans fell to the tops of his work boots. His book was also leather bound, but black, and it sat next to a pot of coffee that he was doing his best to drink his way through. His half eaten plate held the remains of a burger and fries.

Both of them had noticed us come down, and both of them were watching us watch them.

"They've been here for a couple of hours," Carissa told us.

"How is that strange?" Madelynne asked. "He looks like all the other guys here."

"They've been coming here for a month now," she explained. "But they've never been in here together before. Usually one comes in for a night or maybe two in a row, then the other will come in for a couple of nights. They show up around five, read for half an hour or so, then order food, and leave about seven. They always sit in the same booth."

While Madelynne called Lucas and Jolie over to ask them about our visitors, I opened myself to their auras. I was a bit disappointed when they looked nothing more than human.

I listened with half an ear while Jolie told Madelynne about the couple's habits. The guy drank coffee like he was breathing while the woman drank an odd smelling tea. Neither of them talked much although they weren't rude. He was into burgers and fries while she tended to order healthier food like turkey, and they both tipped well.

"That's pretty much it," Lucas added when Jolie had finished. "The only other thing is that they are only in here when Tina stays the day."

While both Madelynne and I found that strange enough to be suspicious, the couple's presence could have been a coincidence. As far as we could see they'd done nothing wrong, so we decided to keep an eye on the two while trying not to be obvious about it. We found a table to sit down and began talking of other things.

The couple took their time finishing their food, in fact had another cup of their respective beverages despite knowing we were watching them. They had paid their bill and were half way to the door when I decided to follow them. Madelynne was only a step or so behind me, as were Scott and Logan, who had noticed our eminent departure.

We reached the edge of the parking lot in time to see them leaving, she in a newer model Grand Prix and he in an Oldsmobile 442.

"We'll take the girl," Madelynne called as she dashed toward her car.

I pulled the keys to the Mustang from my pocket and moments later Scott and I were speeding down the road trying to catch up to the Olds, which was already several blocks ahead. Though I'd been concerned about my driving abilities when I'd first come to Detroit, I knew by now that I could drive much better than Scott when it came to this kind of thing, so I was behind the wheel.

As I drove, I explained to Scott what Carissa and the others had told us about the visitors. My theory was that they were some sort of Tremere watchdogs. Though I wasn't sure how they could affect my Thaumaturgy, I had noticed that I normally had less success when I tried something at the pub than at the agency or at home.

The Mustang was fast, but it was stock. The guy's Olds wasn't, and I had a hard time following him, let alone gaining any ground. I put my foot to the floor and managed to catch up enough to get his license plate before he realized I'd gotten closer and began trying to lose me. It didn't take him long.

We returned to the pub to find Madelynne and Logan were already back and upstairs. After giving Madelynne the plate number, Scott and I went downstairs to play darts. Later that night Howard was able to learn that the man's name was Joe Daniels from Kalamazoo, on the west side of the state. The name didn't ring any bells and neither did the name of the trucking company he was the shipping foreman of.

Madelynne had been working on raising her status in the city, and that meant frequent visits to the more popular Kindred hang outs in town. Tonight she wanted to visit the Sanctuary so we all dressed in our best leather and headed out. Our jobs were to play bodyguard and make her look important.

Sheri was the Toreador who ran the place and she insisted that no weapons were allowed in the Sanctuary. The rule was strictly enforced by a staff of magi and several large werewolves. Bjorn-blood-from-stone was one of those werewolves, and tonight he was manning the door.

Bjorn wore tight blue jeans and a Sanctuary tee shirt that looked painted on. His red hair was pulled back into a pony tail, emphasizing his big Viking beard. His eyes were also red, and dark, very dark as we approached the door. He didn't seem impressed by the fact we didn't wait in the line that stretched down the block, but somehow Madelynne managed to sweet talk him into letting us in.

The bar was crowded, but Frasier got us a table by strong arming a stranger away from a nearly empty booth. Scanning the crowd while the waitress took our order, I was able to identify at least half a dozen Kindred, and possibly that many more. One in particular caught Madelynne's eye and nodded politely.

Michael was the leader of the Brujah Rabble, a group of Kindred both Brujah and Gangrel who kept themselves separate from either clan. Stretch was the only other Gangrel in the group, and he was there tonight with Michael and Nova, one of the Brujah in the group. Rumor had it that Michael was a power player, smart but without many scruples. He looked and thought like a street hustler.

Frasier sat at the table to keep it for us while the rest of us went off to dance. I kept an eye on him while we enjoyed ourselves and about twenty minutes later I noticed a busty blonde vampire approaching the table. I'd seen her before, had noticed that she still had a lot of human mannerisms and qualities, but I didn't know her clan. I would have gone back to the table but Scott's arm around my waist stopped me.

"He can take care of himself," he said into my ear.

"He's fragile," I insisted, looking up into his face.

At his stern look I gave in and went back to dancing, although I continued to watch our table. When Madelynne went to sit back down we followed. The booth was big enough for three to sit on each side, and both Frasier and the woman stood when we approached, leaving me to sit on the inside near the wall. Frasier sat next to me, and the woman next to him. Scott joined Madelynne and Logan on the other side of the table.

"Nancy," Madelynne greeted the woman before introducing me to her. "I see you've already met Frasier."

"Yes," she nearly purred, touching his arm absently. "What brings you out tonight, looking not so Gangrellish?"

Madelynne laughed politely. "A change of scenery."

"It looks good on you," she replied. "You should dress up more often."

As the small talk played around the table, I felt eyes on me. I realized that someone was watching me, and had been for some time, I'd just been too busy to notice. Looking around I found the source of my unease, but I couldn't see the woman's face. She was Kindred.

A few minutes later Nancy gave Frasier her number. "Call me," she told him, then looked at me. "If it's okay with you, that is."

"That would be Frasier's choice," I told her. I wasn't real thrilled with the idea of him dating a Toreador, which it turns out was Nancy's clan, but if it made him happy and she didn't hurt him, who was I to tell him who he could or couldn't date?

As Nancy walked away I realized I had a better view of the woman who had been watching me, who was watching me right now. She started to turn away but took a second look when she realized I'd seen her. With a start I realized it was Missy, the Tremere clan enforcer. In Detroit she was what Christina had been in Salem, but I knew she was a hell of a lot older than me.

"Look, there's a Tremere watching me," I murmured.

Madelynne followed the direction of my gaze. "There's been a Tremere watching you."

She apparently felt the need to mingle, and I was happy enough to get away from Missy, so we went up to the second floor of the club, where it was a bit more quiet and less crowded. We ordered some drinks and Madelynne spent some time talking with one of the Ventrue about the possibility of opening a new bar in Novi.

We mingled and danced for the next few hours. Nancy flitted around the bar like a hummingbird, making quick conversations and sometimes flirtations before moving on. I caught Frasier watching her once in a while, and though he seemed interested he didn't make any effort to go talk to her.

Eventually we left, following Madelynne and Logan back to the pub so we could change before leaving them there and heading to the agency to help Petor get some work done. We decided to go back to the pub before sunrise and stay the day there in case the strange couple showed up again. Petor and Frasier were to be there by sundown as well, just in case there was trouble.

# Out of Control

THERE ARE NO RULES, NO ONE TO BLAME  
THE PRICE YOU PAY TO PLAY THE GAME  
STAINED - PRICE TO PAY

I woke at sundown to the sound of Carissa's screams echoing down the hall. Scott was already gone, of course, but I grabbed one of his shirts to cover my nakedness and a Glock to fill my hand. I met Madelynne in the hall as she came out of her room wearing a robe.

"They're back!" Carissa yelled as soon as she saw us, "and he came in—and he just—and they—"

Madelynne and I pushed past her on our way to the stairs, nearly running in an effort to get to the bar. With a little concentration I could feel the presence of Frasier's necklace somewhere below us, but I knew from experience that feeling the necklace didn't mean he was safe.

The bar wasn't too crowded, thankfully, but there were signs that a bar fight had just occurred, the least of which was Scott, wearing nothing but a pair of jeans, holding Frasier in a full nelson as my ghouls struggled to get away. The couple we'd seen the night before was standing near the same table, which happened to be in the center of a mess of spilled food and beverages. The woman was trying to keep the man calm while Petor, Logan and Lucas stood nearby, watching Scott and the strangers.

"What the hell is going on?" I demanded.

Scott turned Frasier toward me bodily and lowered him until his feet barely touched the ground, but didn't let go.

"Frasier decided to take matters into his own hands," Logan told us. "He attacked the guy."

"Get him out of here," Madelynne ordered in disgust.

I tried to take hold of Frasier, but Scott told me he had him and asked me to open the door. I could hear Madelynne apologizing behind me as I did so.

"It's okay," the woman said. "I'm not sure what set him off."

Scott half carried Frasier past me and I turned to watch as the couple gathered their leather books and started toward the exit. I tried to apologize as they walked past me, but they seemed to be afraid of me so I just let them go. Frasier saw the couple leave the bar and started to go after them, but one quick punch from Scott put him on the ground.

"What the hell did you think you were doing?" I demanded as I handed Scott the gun I still held and knelt next to Frasier. "You can't start fights like that in the middle of the bar, you should have more control than that." I ripped a piece of his shirt tail and began blotting at the blood streaming from his nose as I continued to berate him. Once I got the bleeding under control, I looked up at Scott. "I'm sorry you had to control him like that."

Madelynne told us to take Frasier upstairs and Scott took him by the arm, dragging him to his feet and nearly propelling him toward the building. Once upstairs I filled a bowl with water and began washing the blood away from Frasier's face. It was pretty clear that most of the damage had come from Scott's blow.

"Maybe you should do some obedience training," Madelynne suggested irritably. "Spend more time with him so he knows his place. You coddle them. He's like this because you cater to his every whim."

I shot her an aggravated look. "I don't cater to his whims. If I catered to his whims I'd be sleeping with him."

She continued to chastise both Frasier and me while I finished cleaning him up. As I turned I noticed that Logan wasn't wearing anything more than Scott was, and it reminded me that I was still wearing only one of Scott's shirts. I ordered Frasier to stay where he was while I went to get dressed.

Scott followed me upstairs to get dressed himself. He had a few suggestions about handling Frasier, all of them involving violence and sounding too barbaric for me to contemplate. He went off to work while I finished arming myself.

Once I was dressed I had both of my ghouls come up to my room so I could talk to them privately about what had happened. Frasier told me that he'd noticed the couple there when he'd arrived. He went over to ask them why they were there, and when they wouldn't tell him, he got mad. Apparently when Petor had gotten to the bar just before sundown Frasier had already started the fight.

Shaking my head, I lit into Frasier again about starting fights in the pub. I pointed out that he should have waited for all of us to come downstairs and let us handle it, rather than trying to take care of it himself.

He didn't take the criticism well. Eventually he lost control again and shot to his feet, yelling back. "I was trying to protect you!" he yelled. "I was doing my job! They were reading!"

"Yeah, that's a crime," I said sarcastically. "Let's just burn them at the stake, shall we?"

"They could have been doing something to you," he insisted, "and you don't remember."

"I'm fine," I said harshly. "Behavior like that could remove us from Madelynne's good graces, then where would we go?"

"We have places to go," he shot back.

"Where, Salem?"

"We don't live here, remember? You live with Scott."

I put my hand on his chest and pushed him back onto the bed. "How long do you think that would last if Madelynne decided she didn't want us around?" I demanded. "We can't afford to offend her, no matter how much provocation you may think you have."

He started to argue some more, but I ordered him to shut up in a hard voice I hardly ever used on either of them. I told him he was grounded from the pub unless I was with him. I also said that he was to do dishes and whatever work he had to do until he worked off what he had broken.

Sometime during my rant he healed the damage Scott had done to his face, but I chose not to replace the blood he'd used. He didn't need to be rewarded for his bad behavior.

Scott and I stayed at the pub again, but the next night when we woke the couple was nowhere to be seen. Thankfully, neither was Frasier, as he was working. Madelynne had gotten information back about the woman from her license plate and wanted to visit her under the premise of apologizing again.

The visit was a bust. We found the house all right, but Madelynne ended up hitting a parked car on the street so we headed back to Detroit and the agency where we left the car for Petor to repair when the parts came in.

Madelynne decided that we needed to go out again, this time to the Zombie Zoo. She wanted to see if her new ghouls were out there since she couldn't get a hold of them by phone. We changed into clothing more suitable for the club and headed out.

There was a large group of people milling outside the building once we got there. It was hard to tell if there was a bouncer at the door, though we knew there usually was. Since we didn't see

a line, we headed for the door. The bouncer was waiting just inside and after looking us over real quick, he let us in.

The music was loud once we were inside, and the crowd was a sea of leather and crushed velvet. We didn't see Madelynn's ghouls from the doorway, but there were three levels to the Zoo. She suggested we go dance rather than try to find them in the crush of people. Scott didn't seem too interested in dancing, so we hung back at the edge of the dance floor.

I leaned up to talk in his ear so he could hear me. "What's the matter?"

He shook his head. "Bad memories. I don't like this place."

I waited for him to explain, but he didn't say any more. "We could take a cab somewhere else." We'd ridden with Madelynn, but that wouldn't stop us from leaving if that was what he wanted.

"Nothing I can't live with," he replied firmly, watching the crowd.

Taking him at his word, I turned and leaned against his side. He put his arm around my waist and pulled me a bit closer. I smiled to myself and tried to relax, despite the crush of people.

There were several other vampires in the club, including one wearing white face paint and eyeliner that was doing his best to look like the stereotypical vampire. He was even wearing a tux and tails, and carrying a cane. I pointed him out to Scott, but he didn't know who the guy was.

I was looking around for a vampire I could feel closing in on us when Scott spoke loud enough to be heard over the crowd and the music.

"Joan," he said neutrally.

I turned my head to find the vampire standing right in front of me. I recognized her as Joan Lu, one of the owners of the Zombie Zoo, and Toreador. I'd seen her a few times but never met her. I nodded politely but she didn't even acknowledge my presence.

"Scott," she fairly growled. She flashed her extended fangs to show that she wasn't very happy to see him.

"We're just relaxing," he soothed in an easy voice.

She kept eye contact with him for a long moment before glancing at me. "And your friend is...?"

His hand tightened on my waist. "This is Tina."

I tried to smile, but it was hard with all the tension bouncing between them.

With a final look in my direction and a derisive snort, she flounced away.

"Reminded me of Brenda," I commented.

"She has cause to not trust me," he said into my ear.

Questions rolled through my mind but I bit my tongue. I knew better than to ask Scott about his past. If he wanted to talk about it he would.

"When Holden was in charge he struck a war against the Toreador," he explained.

I wanted to ask questions but I didn't think he'd answer them. Holden had been the Primogen before Ralph, and I knew that as his enforcers Scott and Logan had been forced to do a lot of things they hadn't wanted to do.

Joan made her way through the crowd to Madelynn. Even from across the room, things didn't look friendly, and I wished I knew what they were saying. Not a moment later I struck by overwhelming flood of sights and sounds that drowned out the world. As bad as it was, it felt oddly familiar, as if it had happened to me before I'd lost my memory.

The fit was over as soon as it had begun. Scott had cleared some area around me and was kneeling by my side. I struggled to my feet, embarrassed at the spectacle I'd made of myself. As we settled back against the wall, I explained to Scott what happened.

"There's some guy watching you," he warned me.

I glanced in the direction he was looking but tried not to be too obvious about it. As soon as I spotted the Goth guy he ducked back into the crowd. "He's gone now."

Scott seemed content to stay on the edge of the crowd with his back to the wall, but his agitation and the fit I'd had were getting to me. About the time I was asking him if we could leave, Madelynne joined us with the news that she was ready to go.

Once outside, Madelynne noticed Scott's sigh of relief. "Are you okay?"

He shrugged. "Don't like it in there."

"How come?"

He wasn't any more forthcoming with her than he'd been with me. "Bad memories."

"Sorry," she said sincerely. "You knew we were coming here, you should have said something."

He shrugged. "I lived."

I was quiet on the ride back to the pub. I didn't like that I'd been watched two nights in a row, and I was fairly certain the man tonight had been Tremere. I wondered again if the couple who had been at the pub was involved with them in some way.

Walker's was quiet when we got there just after closing. Carissa told us that our visitors had not been in all night. Scott and I went out hunting and swung by the agency so I could feed Frasier. I knew he was down from the night before, and if the Tremere decided to start trouble I wanted to make sure he was prepared.

The next night was uneventful. Scott and I had spent the day at home, and he was in the shower when I woke up. After he went to work I spent most of the night at the agency helping Petor. I would have taken Frasier with me, but he looked tired when I knocked on his door so I told him to take the night off. Petor looked tired too, when I got to the agency, but he puttered around for a little while before taking himself off to bed.

Once I was alone I walked through the building, trying to get a better feel for the space. Though it was still far from profitable, I was proud of the agency. It was something I could honestly say was mine alone, something no one could claim Christina had begun. It made me hopeful that I could still build a life here in Detroit, safely away from the remnants of her life.

# Surprises

I DON'T KNOW WHO TO TRUST

NO SURPRISE

LINKIN PARK - FROM THE INSIDE

Early Monday evening I joined Scott in the shower. One thing led to another, as it usually did between us, and soon we were making love under the warm stream of water. Unfortunately, our pleasure didn't last. In the middle of everything, Scott yelled in surprise and anger, ripping down the curtain on his way across the room to land against the vanity with his claws out.

I stared at him in shock, surprised to see a shifting mass of colors around him. Orange and purple, red and violet, blue and brilliant rose moved around him in a mottled mess that I somehow managed to understand.

Somewhere in the middle of his anger, fear and confusion was the color that spoke of love. I stood there staring at him for a long moment, letting the implications of that sink in. He loved me. Relief swept through me for a brief instant before I remembered that I'd just thrown him across the room. The red of his anger and darker blue of his suspicion made me focus on the moment at hand.

"What just happened?" I asked softly.

"You m-made me use my blood," he stammered.

"I did?" I leaned back against the shower wall trying to figure out how I could have done that.

"Yeah." He got to his feet slowly, watching me.

I wasn't paying attention. I suddenly realized exactly what I had done in the heat of passion, that it was an intermediate power of Thaumaturgy, and exactly how I could do it again, if I wanted to. I wondered why Mac hadn't mentioned it in the primer he'd given me, or during our talks.

"I didn't know I could do that," I said with more than a little wonder in my voice.

"What did you do?" Scott demanded.

I had almost forgotten he was there. When I told him exactly what I'd done using Tremere terminology, both ancient and modern, his expression told me he didn't understand. "I made you spend blood," I added, gesturing toward his claws and feeling a little relieved that his aura told me he was calming down a bit.

"Didn't I tell you that?" he drawled. "How did you do it?"

I turned the water off and explained more simply how I'd used my magic to trigger his claws. "I didn't realize I was doing it," I said apologetically.

He said nothing, but I saw his claws begin to change back into normal fingernails.

"I'm sorry," I added sheepishly. "I'll try not to do that again."

"Okay." He relaxed a little, enough that I thought it would be okay for me to hand him a towel, he took it cautiously, along with another apology, but he said nothing more.

I gave him plenty of space while we got dressed. I wasn't afraid that I would trigger his claws again, but I was afraid that he wouldn't let me touch him. It had been so easy, making him spend blood that way; it amazed me that I hadn't realized before now how to do it.

It did take a little while for him to relax enough to let me touch him, and even then he was a bit skittish. I couldn't blame him though, what I'd done had shocked us both and I was still a little shaken myself.



After Scott went to work, I called the boys to make sure everything was fine with them, and once I knew they were okay, I finished getting ready for the night. There was a message waiting on my cell phone from Nancy, asking for permission to call Frasier, so I sent him a text message to ask if he was interested. I got back a less than satisfactory 'K', but I figured I'd talk to him about it later.

I was on my way out the door to go to Walker's when Madelynne called.

"Malcolm's here to see you," she said anxiously.

At first I didn't know who she was talking about. "Who?"

"Malcolm," she repeated. "I don't know who he is."

When described a tall thin man with long dreadlocks I figured out who she was talking about. "I'm on my way," I told her. "Does he look like he's going to stick around?"

"He's waiting for you," she stated. "He says the first time you tell him to leave he will. He's brought some hired help with him, they're the same kind as Carissa, and she's freaked out. She says they're touched. Come in the back door."

I agreed that it was a good idea to be cautious, and ten minutes later I was pulling into the parking lot. Parked in a row by themselves were the couple's cars from a few nights ago and an older style van with no windows. I parked near the back of the building and went into the back to find Madelynne waiting for me.

"Everything okay?" I asked, worried that something might have happened since I'd spoken with her.

"You have interesting friends," she drawled.

I laughed. "I have good friends, she picked weirdoes."

She led me over to the door that led to the main room of the pub. "Look out and tell me if you recognize them."

Cautiously I opened the door a crack and looked through. The couple was sitting at one of the tables this time with the man that Madelynne had described. "That's Chaos, isn't it?" I murmured, remembering the image I'd seen shortly after coming to Detroit.

"No," she said, confused. "He said his name is Malcolm. Wait here." She pushed through the door and went over to the table where the others were waiting. "You're not Malcolm," she accused as I listened through the barely opened door.

"Last time I checked I was," he assured her.

She shook her head. "Tina says you're not Malcolm."

He looked at her in surprise. "Who does she say I am?"

"Chaos."

"No, I'm not him," he said with a hint of a smile. "Not at the moment I'm not. It's a long story."

"You might want to tell me or I'm not letting her come out," she warned him.

He sighed. "I'm the essence of magic, three personas live in this body. Right now I'm Malcolm. Happy?"

She looked confused, but I thought I understood what he was saying. Christina had wondered about that in the notes she'd taken on the Trimuritive.

"You mean her and the rest of us no harm?" she asked.

"I don't intend on harming anyone," he said honestly. "I'm not going to stand by and let myself be harmed, but I think that's fair."

"You'll be safe," she told him. "Frasier's working."

"The boy dealt with Chaos, not me," he replied firmly, "although Chaos used my name."

She studied his face for a moment. "I'm assuming that Chaos is a bad guy."

"Oh, yeah." His expression was deadly serious.

"And you've got him locked away tightly, right?" she asked. "Threw away the key? No chance of him coming out?"

He smiled. "This body is under my control."

As Madelynne walked back toward me I realized that I'd been hearing their conversation as if I'd been standing right beside the table, even though I was on the other side of a busy bar room from them.

"What do you think?" she asked as she joined me in the kitchen.

"I talked to the people from Salem," I said with a shrug. "I suppose it's only fair I talk to him."

She nodded. "He's a little friendlier."

"Jason was pretty friendly, at first," I pointed out.

"I wasn't real impressed with him," she scoffed.

"I know." I checked the draw of the knife strapped to my right forearm, and the draw of the gun in the small of my back. I wasn't exactly afraid of this guy, but Brenda and Jason had seemed so certain he was evil. Once I was sure I could defend myself if I had to, I let Madelynne lead the way across the room.

Malcolm stood with a smile on his face when he saw me enter the room. He looked so much like Chaos, or who I'd been told was Chaos, although he was a bit younger. His eyes were a neutral gray instead of black, and I just couldn't picture him as evil. He seemed to be wearing as many necklaces as I was, though most of them were simply chains. I did see a slanted triangle like the one I wore, and a woman's class ring among the chains. He was also wearing a knife with a black handle.

"Hello," he greeted me as I approached the table.

"Hello," I replied, studying his face.

He was looking me over as well. "How are you?"

"A little confused," I admitted softly. "You don't look like the vision I had and you're calling yourself Malcolm and not Chaos, and Brenda and Jason pretty much said you were evil."

"Yes, well," he said with an easy smile, "evil is a relative term, and some relatives are evil." Madelynne laughed smugly as Malcolm gestured for me to sit down with them. "I can't attest to the vision you had, but like I told Miss Walker, Chaos is an aspect of me, but I'm in control right now, just me."

"Can't say that I remember you," I said as I sat down.

"Well, you're welcome." He sounded pleased.

I looked at him in surprise. "Am I to assume you did the memory wipe on me?"

"Parts of me," he admitted with a hint of a smile. "Well, all of me for different reasons."

I wasn't sure how I felt about his admission. "And what were those reasons?" I asked in a low voice.

"My reasons were to take away all the pain you've had in your life," he said gently.

I laughed dryly. "I don't think it worked, they followed me."

"Pains in the ass," he muttered under his breath.

"Occasionally," I admitted. "And the other reasons?"

He met my eye without flinching. "You'd have to ask Chaos and the Crone."

"Aren't you them?" I challenged.

"In part, but not entirely," he replied calmly. "It's a long story and if you don't remember, it's not worth explaining."

I shook my head. "I remember very little."

He seemed a little irritated as he said, "You shouldn't remember anything."

"Yeah, well family can be a little... what's the word?" I drawled, looking at Madelynne.

"Pushy," she supplied quickly.

I grinned. "Pushy is the word."

"Insistent," she added.

"That's another word."

"Annoying."

I nodded firmly. "Yeah, and I remember a little."

"Like I said, you shouldn't remember anything," he repeated, "but now that you do remember something, I'm here to give you a choice."

I said nothing, just looked at him expectantly.

"I can either reinforce the spell so you don't remember anything," he told me, "I can remove it completely so you remember everything, or I can let you be and let you piece back together your life for the rest of your life."

His choices were frankly remarkable. To think that with a bit of magic he could manipulate my mind into doing whatever he wanted. I'd made the choice not to get my memory back, but that had been when the only rituals available were ones that would cause harm.

Madelynne must have been thinking along the same lines. "I've got a question. The last two spells or whatever they were to bring back her memory required... interesting ingredients that weren't all that pleasant, or humane. What does yours involve, just out of curiosity?"

"Some candles and herbs a little blood," he told her. "Mine, not hers. A bit of chanting."

With a simple yes I could remember everything that Christina knew, I could have her life back, could remember everything I had wanted so many times to remember. It sounded easy, too easy, but if I could just remember the *magic* she'd used....

The talk of blood made me remember something. "Your name is Robbins, right? Didn't that name come up when the countess did the Blood Walk?"

"Yes," Madelynne agreed in surprise. "He's bound to you?"

"Yeah," I answered before asking him, "Why?"

"Because Chaos in all his fervor took some blood," he told us, "yours, not mine, and drank it."

"Why?" Madelynne asked.

"To make himself a ghoul." He said it like it was an obvious face.

I could see in his aura the truth of his words, but I knew it wasn't the whole story. "Why didn't Chaos' name come up on the list?"

"Because Chaos hasn't actually been born yet, it's still me," he told me. "The Crone's already lived and died, now it's my turn."

"I'm getting a headache," I murmured as I rubbed a hand across my eyes. After a moment I looked up at him. "Why are you coming here to offer this to me?"

"Well, I always knew you were bright, and your mind has proved resilient in overcoming my..." he seemed to grope for words, then settled on, "gift so far. I think it has something to do with your... good-willed family, what they did. And I sent my associates here to try and keep you under wraps, and your mind built up a tolerance to them very quickly."

I raised an eyebrow. "Keep me under wraps?"

"It would be dangerous for you to regain everything all at once, powers, memories, etcetera," he explained.

"Dangerous for me," I asked softly, "or dangerous for you?"

"I think for you," Madelynne murmured.

He glanced at her, then looked back at me. "Ah, everyone involved."

Remembering Scott flying across the room, I couldn't help but agree with him.

"So I sent the both of them together to try and contain you," he continued, "and, well, you all insisted on chasing them out and beating them up."

"That was not me," I said quickly, glancing at his friends. "I was sleeping. And Frazier's been chastised."

"Yes, she's having issues with her associate," Madelynne offered.

"Don't you still have two?" Malcolm seemed concerned. "Don't you still have Mr. Andrews? I'm assuming you do, because your name's Andrews now."

"Petor's better behaved," I told him.

Madelynne smiled grimly. "Frasier has a temper."

"And a sense of adventure that needs a nice rein," I drawled.

"I could have told you that a year ago, but would you have listened?" he murmured before shaking his head. "Never mind. Anyways, so I thought I would pay a personal visit and make the offer, get your answer once and for all."

"Now this flood of memories," Madelynne said carefully, "would she receive everything gradually, or is it all going to come back in just one big bang?"

He shook his head sadly. "Psychic surgery is a touchy thing, I can try to make it steady and gradual, but I can't guarantee it."

She didn't seem to like that answer. "You already said you didn't want it all rushing back on its own."

"Well, if she's confined," he clarified, "we would be able to handle it."

"You keep using words like contained and confined," I said softly, not liking the idea at all.

"I'm not going to stake you," he assured me. "It would be more like... a padded room."

I shook my head and looked at Madelynne. "We've had the discussion about the whole thing on memory. I've already said 'no thank you'."

"Right, but that had humane issues," she pointed out. "There is also no guarantee on that either. If he's the one that caused the memory loss, it stands to reason that he can fix it. Maybe he can give you a little bit and see if you like it, then if you want the rest he'll give it all back, small doses."

"I don't think so." I didn't want Christina's memories of Jason come between Scott and me, especially now I knew that he loved me. "That leaves the other two choices, remembering nothing or remembering what I have now."

"If those are your two choices, I'd stick with the life I have now," she murmured.

"Again, I can attempt to leave you with your memories of Detroit," he added. "But if I leave you all of your memories of Detroit, you're going to remember your family coming, and me, and everything else, and it's going to confuse you even more."

I smiled wryly. "Mister, I'm already there."

"I think you should just leave well enough alone," Madelynne suggested. "Either you want it or you don't. I don't think there should be an in between."

"Well, if I wanted it, I think I'd be back in Salem already," I pointed out. "At least this route doesn't need a cat's placenta or the eyes of the seer."

"Was this one ritual?" Malcolm asked intently.

"No, there were two," Madelynne explained.

"Voodoo, and dark thaumaturgy," he murmured.

"This is a little less involved then having dead kittens," she added.

"You'd be surprised," he began, then stopped himself. "No, actually, you wouldn't be because you won't be in the room at the time."

"Well, compared to the last few things we've been presented with, this is a little easier to swallow," she pointed out. "Psychic surgery, dead kitties. Psychic surgery, blind seer."

"If it was real important, the Powers That Be would make them grow back," he smirked, making his friends snicker a little.

"Are there side effects to this?" Madelynne demanded. "There were side effects to the others. Would it make you evil?"

"That would be the dark thaumaturgy ritual," he explained, "and that is one of the warlock's own intricacies. Again, evil is relative. There are no guarantees when it comes to Tina, unfortunately. I may not get be able to remove only the memories she wants me to, if she chooses that route. I may get too many and erase her time here in Detroit."

She frowned. "I don't understand."

"It's psychic surgery," he pointed out. "I'd be cutting off part of her brain from active thought."

"Oh, yeah, that sounds like what I wanna run out and do tomorrow night," I drawled sarcastically. "Why does everyone want to mess with my brain? I just wanna know this. Wasn't I good enough before?" I looked at Malcolm challengingly. "And what was so painful you thought it would be so great for me to forget?"

"Wouldn't that defeat the purpose of making you forget if I told you?" he asked logically.

"What did you make Petor forget?"

He shook his head. "If you get your memory back, you'll remember."

"I don't want my memory back," I said firmly. "I don't want to wake up and go 'oh god, what am I doing here, I should be in Salem, wearing Gucci and having tea with Brenda'."

"We would stop you," Madelynne laughed.

Malcolm remained sober. "I'm pretty sure if you got those memories you wouldn't be in Salem having tea with Brenda you'd be on a plane hunting me."

I looked at him in surprise. "Really? Why? Because of Jason? He hates you."

He shook his head sadly. "He doesn't hate me, he hates Chaos. Despite you telling them point blank that me, Chaos and the Crone are three separate entities with our own respective thoughts, behaviors, and everything else, they still don't believe you."

"That doesn't surprise me," I said, looking down at the table. "They've never believed me. Was I a liar, before?"

"No," he replied gently. "You were gullible."

That explained a lot, if he was telling the truth. "Would Jason be the only reason that I came after you if I remembered?"

"No." At my expectant look, he added, "Basically you're the reason I haven't fulfilled my destiny yet. Twice."

"Bad girl," Madelynne teased. "What was your destiny?"

"To father a son and die," he answered simply.

She looked at me in surprise. "What the hell did you do?"

With no memory, I didn't have an answer for her. We both looked to Malcolm for an explanation.

"The first time she directly led to the—" He hesitated a moment, then said, "Rather I blamed her for Father Strong killing the chosen mother. I don't know if she actually had anything to do with it. The second time she came to an alternate reality to rescue an infant child that I had borrowed."

Borrowed. That was a hell of a word for kidnapping. "Would that be Lena's?"

"Yeah." He had a sheepish look on his face, but I could tell he didn't really feel guilty about what he'd done.

"I think I'd be rather upset if you borrowed my child," Madelynne told him.

He was looking at me. "How the hell was I supposed to know that your brothers had been to Ramadan before? What the hell...?"

"My brothers?" I asked.

He nodded. "Both of them."

"You have two brothers?" Madelynne asked me.

I nodded. "I was told about the one, and I guess Cormac is my brother, but that's Kindred and different." I looked at Malcolm. "Are those the two you're talking about?"

"Yeah."

"Is he like the rest of your family," Madelynne asked him, "or is he like...?"

"Robert? Robert is a..." he hesitated for a moment, then said, "mage. He's not like her vampire family, he seems to be normal, although I've never actually dealt with him."

"Then there's hope," she murmured.

"Maybe." I hadn't actually tried to contact Christina's brother, even though I had his number programmed into my phone. Now wasn't the time to think about Robert. I turned to Malcolm. "I'm just supposed to trust that you want to wipe my memories because if I remember anything, then I'll come back and go after you to thwart your destiny?"

"Well, if I leave you that memory, yes," he agreed.

I shook my head wryly. "Yeah, I want his mind in mine."

"I could have come in, just taken you hostage, and done it," he said reasonably, "but I thought I'd give you the choice, I am the living embodiment of the Verbena art, you know." The last bit was smug and cocky, but I could tell he was joking.

"Sounds a little like Brenda, doesn't he?" I asked Madelynne with a grin.

"Just that one time," she agreed. "It made me cringe."

I wanted to laugh at how awestruck Joe looked, but I figured it was a bad idea. To Malcolm, I asked, "How long do I have to make up my mind?"

We agreed that he would return in three nights and that I would have an answer for him. He thanked me for seeing him, and stood. His friends followed him to the door, as did three others who had been sitting in a booth near the back of the bar. Carissa hid as they walked past and I could see why. The one in the lead was hooded, cloaked, and floating. The next was cloaked and pale, walking on his tiptoes because the bodybuilder bringing up the rear had a hold of him by the scruff of the neck.

When they'd gone, I turned to Madelynne. "What do I do now, do we trust him or want him to do anything?"

She shook her head. "This is not a 'we' question."

"But I trust your judgment."

"He seemed different," she murmured, "but he also seemed to be telling the truth."

I nodded. "And forthcoming with his answers even when they're not real clear."

"He's given you a few details on your life without bias," she added.

"Without telling me how I should feel and what I should do," I agreed, "although I didn't like the whole keeping tabs on me and such."

"It almost sounded like it was for your own good," she pointed out. "Like he was actually looking out for you."

"Put it this way," Logan put in, "they kept tabs on you for a few months without you even knowing it."

"I suppose he could have done whatever he wanted," I said reluctantly.

"He did give you the choice," Madelynne reminded me, "whereas your family was going to stake you and drag you back."

Logan grinned. "And they love you."

## Contemplation

I'VE COME TOO CLOSE TO HAPPINESS  
TO HAVE IT SWEEPED AWAY  
DON'T THINK I CAN TAKE THE PAIN  
JANET JACKSON - AGAIN

When Malcolm and his friends were gone I felt nothing but confusion. He certainly hadn't acted like the creature of evil that Brenda and Jason had claimed he was. In fact, Malcolm had been more honest and forthcoming with his answers than anyone but Frasier and Cormac had been.

I told Madelynne and Logan that I needed some time to think and went to sit in the corner booth that Malcolm's strange friends had so recently vacated. While I had already made up my mind that I didn't want my memory back, his offer was tempting, especially after the incident earlier.

It wasn't that I wanted to remember Christina's life. I had to admit that sometimes I thought about what that would be like, but I knew remembering everything would probably cause a lot more problems than it solved. What I really wanted to remember was her *magic*, but I didn't think that Malcolm could get that specific. He had talked as if there might be problems if he had to be that precise in the memories he left me with.

A little while later Madelynne joined me, asking if I minded some company.

I looked up and tried to smile. "I would appreciate it, actually."

"What's on your mind?" she asked softly. "You have been sitting here alone for some time now. That really isn't like you."

"Well, I have to make up my mind, don't I?" I asked, running my fingers along a scratch on the table. "As nice as it would be, no one else can do it for me."

I jumped as a vision popped into my mind. I saw the hooded figure who'd left with Malcolm sitting at the table. The dark blue of his skin stood out plainly against the wood of the table, and he was carving the line with a yellowed cracked nail. Just that quickly, the vision was gone.

While I knew that what had happened was called Spirit's Touch, and that it was a level of Auspex used to receive visions from objects, I couldn't for the life of me remember how to do it again.

"Sometimes I hate that I can't remember my past," I admitted softly. "I'd like to know enough about my abilities that can stop myself from seeing things at random, or accidentally throwing Scott across the room again."

"What?" she demanded, obviously surprised. "What do you mean, throwing Scott across the room? Feel like explaining that one?"

I glanced up quickly then away again, a little embarrassed. "I didn't mean to, it just... happened. One minute we were... close, and the next he was on his ass across the room, claws out." I met her eyes, feeling sad and angry at the same time. "If I could remember what Christina could do, shit like that wouldn't happen."

"It seems that things are coming back on there own, or at least a little bit." She seemed quite concerned. "I assume that Scott is ok and isn't mad at you, right?"

"He's fine," I assured her quickly. "Just a little... concerned. I am too. How do I know I'm not going to lose control like that again? Or do something worse? I have no idea what the Tremere can do with their blood magic."



"I really have no answer for you on that one. I don't even know any Tremere." She looked down for a moment, as if not sure what to say. "Is there someone that you can talk to other than Brenda? Maybe Cormac? Maybe they can guide you a bit more or something."

"I tried calling him earlier, but I got his voice mail," I said sadly. The message had said something about demon hunting, and reincarnation. "Hard telling when I can get a hold of him. He might be able to help about the Thaumaturgy, but I don't think he could help with my decision. I'm not sure anyone can," I pointed out. "What if I remembered everything and hated myself because I'm really everything Brenda said I was; Irresponsible and reckless, and dangerous to my friends?"

"Well, I don't think that you are any of those things and I don't think that the rest of us do either," she pointed out. "You know, that is just what Brenda said about you. Did you ask anyone else what you were like? Maybe you should, compare what they all say and then make a decision for yourself." She shook her head "I think that you have a lot of soul searching to do and I will do whatever I can to help you and support whatever decision that you make, but it has to be your choice and yours alone. Don't let others influence you."

"They all seemed to have the same opinion of Christina Kline," I told her sadly. "Well meaning, but unthinking when it came to putting her friends and family in danger." I thought for a moment, then said, "Maybe I should talk to Frasier about whatever pain Malcolm was talking about. He seemed to think that wiping my memory was a favor."

"You aren't afraid that he will try to sway your decision one way or another?"

"I don't think so." Honestly I didn't know what he thought about my lack of memory. I'd never asked him. "I think he's happy enough here and he was really angry with Jason and Brenda for wanting to take me with them no matter what I thought. Although I can't imagine he'll like the idea of Malcolm using magic on me."

"Well, I'm not so sure that I like the idea as well," she admitted, "but it seems the better of all the other options that you have been given."

"I really don't know how to make up my mind," I told her. "Malcolm's offer seems to be the safest, but no one seems to trust him but Petor."

"What did Cormac have to say about him, if anything?" she asked. "How long has Malcolm known you or your family? He mentioned something about your dad."

"I have no idea. The only thing I know about my father is that he lives in San Francisco and he was one of the reasons I was embraced. Malcolm was my mentor when I was mortal, but I don't know for how long or any details about it really." I thought about everything I could remember, about everything that had been in Christina's diaries. "The only real things I've been told about Malcolm, or Chaos, or whatever he's calling himself today, are that Brenda and Jason hate him, Frasier doesn't like him much better, and he was protecting me when he sent me here. Christina's diaries tell a far different story, but she hated him too. That really doesn't help a lot, does it?"

"Maybe you should talk a little to Malcolm first," she suggested. "There seem to be mixed thoughts and ideas about him out there. Obviously he must have been a good guy before especially for you to have him as a mentor no matter how long it was for."

I smiled wryly. "Good to know you trust my judgment, even from before I knew you." The smile faded as I thought about the decision I'd yet to make. "Still, doesn't seem like he'll tell me much unless I want my memory back. Make more work for him, remember?" Look down at the table again, playing with the scratch. "I've been thinking about what it would be like to remember everything."

"And what is it that you thought?"

"In some ways I think it'd be nice. I wouldn't have to wonder if they're all lying to me, you know? Wonder about which one I can trust, or if I can trust any of them. I'd know what I can do, what I can't do with the spooky boo, and such." Look back up at Madelynne sadly. "But what if I turned into *her*?"

"You are a different person now," she assured me. "You would only turn into 'her' if that is what you wanted. And from all that I can tell that is not who you are or what you seem to want to be." She hesitated for a moment before continuing. "I can't tell you what to decide, if it were me I would have a hard time deciding as well, but I think that in the end I would do it because I don't know if I could live the rest of my life not knowing and thinking what if I knew this and if I could only remember just a little. Don't let what I would do influence you too much though, this has to be your decision and yours alone."

"Actually, that's exactly what I've been thinking," I told her. "If I don't take this opportunity to get my memory back, I may never get another chance. It's just that I've been so happy here, I don't want to fuck that up."

"How could you fuck it all up?" she asked. "By remembering who you are? You already know who you are, Tina Andrews. And remembering a few other details is not going to change that."

"I want to believe that, I really do," I said honestly, "but sometimes wishing doesn't make it real."

"I know." She reached across the table and covered my hand with hers. "But it's a risk that you will have to take if your memory being returned is what you really want."

"I know."

"So then is your mind made up," she asked, "or are you going to think some more about it?"

"I'm going to think some more about it, but I think I've made up my mind," I admitted. "I can't risk hurting someone because I don't know what the hell I can do. Besides, I get my memory back I can make some more of those cool stone things, like Frasier has."

She smiled and nodded. "I think that it is time that we do something a bit more fun and lighthearted, what do you think?"

I agreed readily, anxious to turn my mind to something other than Christina Kline or what would happen if or when I got her memories back. We decided on a girls' night out, taking Maggie and Emily with us while we went out on the town. We didn't come back to the pub until after closing.

Frasier and Petor were waiting for me when we got back. I took them aside and asked Frasier if it was really okay to let Nancy call him.

"You're gonna let me go out with her?" he asked, surprised.

"If you want to," I told him. "There are rules though. No blood exchange, I have to know where you are, and I don't want major details." I thought about it for a moment then added, "And you have to behave yourself. Misbehave in the bar again I'll have to cut off your dating privileges." Petor snickered at that, and my eyes turned to him. "Just wait until you want dating privileges."

"Wait a minute," he said with mock indignation. "I'm the good one."

I smiled. "Yes, you are. You haven't beaten up anyone in the parking lot, so you're right." I hesitated a moment, studying Frasier. "What do you remember about Malcolm Robbins?"

We'd already talked about Malcolm, but he went over everything again. Malcolm had kidnapped Lena and taken her to another reality with the intent to steal her child. The Trimuritive was the embodiment of the Verbena art and included Malcolm, Chaos, and the Crone. He

admitted that the one he'd seen in the alternate reality had most likely been Chaos, not Malcolm, and offered his opinion that Chaos had been the one to orchestrate Jason's embrace.

Petor really didn't remember enough to form an opinion of Malcolm. All he had was a ten second memory of Chaos telling him to keep me safe while standing in a castle with a ghost and another vampire.

"Why are you asking?" Frasier asked. When I didn't reply right away, he said again, "Why?"

"What would you say if I said I had a pretty reliable way to get my memory back," I said carefully, watching their faces, "without killing any babies or kittens or blinding a seer?"

They glanced at each other, then said as one, "Are you gonna do it?"

I shrugged. "I'm thinking about it."

"How?" Frasier demanded.

"Why?" Petor asked, sounding confused.

"Spooky boo," I said to Frasier. To Petor, I added, "and so that I know what I can and can't do, and stop throwing people across the room accidentally." I held up my hands to stop them from asking about that. "You don't want to know."

Frasier frowned. "What sort of spooky boo?"

"Some chanting, candles, and some blood," I told him, "not mine."

"From whom?" he demanded.

"The person doing the spell." When they glanced at each other, I added, "Look, I'm not asking for permission to do it, I asked what you thought about it."

"Well," Frasier said calmly, "it would depend more on if we knew the details surrounding it, right Petor?"

Petor's shrug told me he really didn't care. He was used to me being Tina Andrews, he didn't even remember Christina Kline. While we were friends, it was more of a business relationship than what Christina had shared with Frasier, who seemed to have more of a personal stake in the matter.

"It's a safe arrangement with someone that, theoretically, we can trust," I assured them both.

"If you're that convinced, why are you asking us?" Frasier shot back.

I wasn't too sure about that myself. "I want to know your opinion."

"I just gave it to you," he said irritably.

"Fine." They weren't helping my state of mind, and besides, I already thought I knew what I was going to do.

"Are we dismissed?" Frasier demanded.

"Got someplace to be? Oh, that's right," I said dryly. "You've got a hot date, or a theoretical hot date."

He stood quickly, knocking his chair back, and strode from the bar as if the hounds of hell were licking at his heels.

"Do I have to leave," Petor asked hesitantly.

"You do whatever you want, baby," I replied, distracted. When headed for the bar and called for Carissa to pour him a drink, I added, "Just don't drive home afterwards."

I wasn't much in the mood to be social after Frasier left. I went back to the apartment and called Nancy to let her know that it was okay to call him, though I warned her that I was very

protective and that she needed to make sure she didn't hurt him. She assured me that she would not and I had to take her at her word.

Scott came home around four and after he'd gotten cleaned up, I asked him what he thought about me getting my memory back. "And I don't want to hear it 'whatever you want to do'," I added. "I want your honest opinion of what you think."

"I don't care," he said simply.

"I just said I didn't want to hear that," I murmured.

"No, you just said you didn't want to hear 'whatever you want to do'," he shot back.

I gave him a frustrated look. "It's the same thing."

"No it's not," he insisted.

I shook my head. "Do you have an opinion other than you don't care?"

"Well, if you turn into who your family said you were, then, you know...." He let his words trail off leaving the thought unfinished.

"Then, what?" I prompted.

"You know," he insisted.

His aura told me that he was very worried, even a little afraid. He was also aggressive, angry, bitter and distrustful. I put two and two together and figured out what the problem was; he thought I was going to go back to Jason. All this time together and he honestly thought I'd leave him as soon as I got Christina's memories back.

"No I don't know," I said firmly. "I'd like you to spell it out for me."

"Look, you do whatever you want to do," he growled before storming out.

I reached for the phone to call him, but my hand settled on his cell phone so I knew it would be useless. I called Walker's a little while later, and Madelynne assured me that he was there, and safe.

"Just give him a little time to calm down, then talk to him," she suggested when I explained what had happened.

I agreed, though I didn't like it, mostly because I had no idea what to say to him. Maybe I shouldn't have pushed him, but damn it, it would be nice to be clear on where I stood with him. Either he trusted me or he didn't, he loved me or he didn't.

Shortly after five Petor knocked on the door. "What the hell's going on?" he demanded the moment I let him in.

I turned away in disgust and sat back down in the chair. "I just asked him the same question I did you guys."

He closed the door and stared at me irritably. "And you probably didn't take his answer the same way you didn't take ours, did you?"

I shot him a hard look. "I just wanted to know how he felt, he wouldn't tell me."

"What did he say?" he asked as he came to stand over my chair.

"That he didn't care," I sighed, "and then he got all cranky."

"Is that all he said?"

I shook my head. "There was something about me going back to something. I think he meant Jason, but he could have meant the Tremere clone."

"You wanted the one person in your life that doesn't talk a lot, particularly when it's about something painful, to say the name of his competition?" he demanded angrily.

I met his gaze with no little irritation. "Yeah, what part of that wasn't clear?"

"Are you fucking nuts?" he exploded, throwing his hands in the air. "He loves you, he's afraid of losing you, and you go and do this to him. I hope you do turn back into Christina."

"Gee thanks." I growled. "I wasn't aware that it was a crime to wanna hear the words."

"When was the last time you heard Scott thread seven words together in a row?" he challenged.

"It's only three," I barked.

"You're asking our opinions, but you don't want our opinions," he told me sharply. "You want us to tell you what to do."

I got to my feet, forcing him to stand back. "That is not true."

"We gave you our opinion and it wasn't good enough," he pointed out.

"Because you guys have to have some opinion either way," I insisted. "I don't want you to tell me what to do; I want to know how you feel."

"We tried to tell you that," he shot back. "I don't care. I've known you for three months. I never knew Christina. I don't know if she's better or worse. I'm here as a business associate. I don't care. Frasier's concerned as ever and he wants to know how you're going to do this."

I shook my head stubbornly. "He doesn't need to know in order to have an opinion."

"Knowledge is power," he growled.

I'd had enough of his tirade. "Are you done with the lecture?"

"Yeah." Without another word he left, slamming the door behind him.

I sank back down in the chair and pulled the blanket up over my lap though I knew it wouldn't warm me. "Three for three, damn it."

Once I was sure that my voice wouldn't shake, I called Madelynne again. She confirmed that Scott had come back there after work and gone straight to his room. She also promised to call me if he left. I thanked her and went back to the soul searching I'd been doing before Petor had interrupted me.

What was so important about getting my memory back anyway? Christina had been a fool, and a pushover, a Tremere clone. A part of me was terrified that if I did get her memories back I'd regret everything I'd done since I woke up in Detroit. I was happy here, and I didn't see how I could have been happy anywhere else.

Yes, it would be nice to remember the magic that she'd had at her fingertips, but did I really need to remember that stuff to be happy? I'd been happy enough with my life before Malcolm had shown up with his offer.

Though Scott hadn't voiced his answer, his opinion had been crystal clear. He didn't want to risk losing me to Christina's forgotten memories of Jason. I wished there was a way that I could reassure him it wouldn't happen, but I really couldn't. I had no idea how I would feel if I remembered what life had been like before. And as much as I'd like to think nothing would change, some things surely would.

I didn't want things to change. I liked my life. I liked the way Scott made me feel, the way he accepted nearly everything about me. The attraction I'd felt for him from the beginning had grown until I thought I might love him. Given the colors of his aura, he was already in love with me. Petor certainly seemed to think so.

Petor hadn't said anything I hadn't already told myself. I'd been a fool to provoke Scott. His aura might have told me he loved me, but that didn't mean he was happy about it. I also knew

that he hated Jason, hated any reminder of Christina's husband. With his quick temper I'd been stupid to push him like that.

As the dawn kissed the night sky I pulled the blanket tighter around me and prayed that I hadn't pushed him too far.

# Apologies

I WAS WRONG

I'VE BEEN WRONG FOR WAY TOO LONG

NICKELBACK - LEFT

I woke in the chair, a little confused for a moment as to how I'd gotten there. I remembered when I realized I didn't hear the shower running. Feeling more depressed than I could remember being, I went to get ready for the evening.

A quick call to Madelynne confirmed that Scott was still at the pub. "Do you think I should come or do you think I should wait?"

"Come and talk to him," she suggested. "Otherwise you're going to be all miserable for the rest of the night."

She was right, I just hoped that I wouldn't be miserable after I talked to Scott. I went to the pub and went in through the back, going directly upstairs and finding Madelynne and Logan in the living room.

"How are you doing?" she asked me.

I shrugged. "Okay. Is he upstairs?" When she nodded, I went up to our room, standing outside the door for a long moment trying to gather my courage. Finally I opened the door slowly and peeked in to see him sitting on the bed, tying his laces. "Can I come in?"

He looked back down at his boots. "It's your room too."

"I didn't know if you were still mad at me," I said as I came in and closed the door behind me. I leaned against it and gathered my courage to speak. "I don't know how to say this so I'm just going to say it. I don't want to move to LA. I don't want to move back to Salem. I don't want to turn into some Tremere clone. I don't want to go anywhere or be anything other than where I'm at and who I am, but it'd be nice to know what I can do so I don't do stupid things like accidentally throw people across the room."

"So practice," he said shortly, straightening to look at me.

"If I knew what I could do maybe I would," I told him, "but since I really don't, and I can't get a Tremere to tell me—"

"Call someone and ask," he growled.

"I tried that," I replied quickly. "I was invited to stay at the chantry. I don't want to do that."

"So be happy just being a Gangrel."

It was no use pointing out that I wasn't Gangrel when I'd been trying so hard for months to be just that. Besides, I didn't really know if I was in love with Scott but I knew that I wanted to be and if it would take the shadows from his eyes and the fear from his aura, I'd do anything he asked me to, anything at all.

"Okay." I walked over to the bed and sat down beside him. "I'm sorry I wasn't listening to anyone."

He shrugged and went back to tying his boot. "It's your life."

Though he didn't seem pissed at me anymore, I knew he was still mad. I only got one kiss before he left for work much earlier than usual.

"Going to work already?" Madelynne asked when he said goodbye on his way through the living room.

He didn't answer, just grunted and left.

"He's still mad at me," I said sadly as I joined her and Logan.

"I'm sorry." She sounded as if she really meant it.

I shrugged. "It's my fault." And I knew it was. I should never have tried to push him to say things he obviously wasn't ready to say. Jason was still a sore spot between us, and probably always would be.

Neither of my boys was answering their phones, which worried me a little. I hung around the pub hoping they'd come in, but I settled for hearing that Maggie had spent most of the night at the agency and seen that they were both safe and sound.

When Scott came back around four he wasn't any more cranky than usual. While he still wasn't talkative, he seemed to have gotten over his irritation with me. We went back to the apartment and spent an hour or so before dawn simply enjoying each other.

The next evening when the boys' still didn't answer their phones I decided I'd had enough of their tantrums. I headed for the agency after sending Frasier a text message that read, 'Call me or I'm revoking your dating privileges.' He called me a few minutes later.

"I'm on a date, what do you need?" he demanded impatiently.

"I wanted to talk to you earlier," I pointed out, "but you wouldn't answer your phone."

"I'm on a date, having fun," he replied irritably.

I bit my tongue before I started yelling at him. "I was worried when you didn't answer the phone."

"Which time?" he asked dryly. "I haven't been answering it for two days."

"Exactly," I growled. "And just because I get a little bit snippy and piss you off doesn't mean that you can't answer your phone. Really."

"I figured if it was an emergency you'd get a hold of me," he replied. "Now if you don't mind the stake is getting cold and the wine is getting warm."

"I expect you to check in with me before dawn," I warned him, "face to face. I'll be at the apartment."

"Fine."

After a quick warning to be careful, I hung up. I was worried about his attitude, but I wasn't sure what to do about it. In a very real way he had every right to be upset with me, but in another, I couldn't let him keep up this attitude with me. Telling myself I'd worry about it later, I pulled into the parking lot of the agency.

Petor was in the garage working on an engine. After a polite greeting, I asked him what was wrong with his phone.

He shrugged. "I don't know, go check it."

"It'd be nice if you answered it," I said in a hard voice.

"I knew you'd let me know when you made up your mind," he pointed out.

"How would you know if you don't answer your phone?" I threw up my hands in exasperation. "God, didn't I just have this conversation with Frasier?"

"Yes, you did," he murmured.

"He called you?" I demanded. "You know, Madelynne's right," I seethed when he nodded. "I don't take a stern enough stance with you two. I coddle you. You get spoiled. Of course if you answered your phone, you'd have a chance to listen to me apologize. But since you don't answer your phone, I guess I don't need to do that."



I stood there for a long moment watching him work on the engine. I tried to hold onto my anger, but I just couldn't do it. I'd been wrong and he'd been right. "I'm sorry I was bullheaded and didn't listen," I offered softly.

"Don't apologize on my account just because I was right," he replied.

"Don't rub it in," I warned him. "Anyway, it doesn't really matter because I've decided I'm fine the way I am. Not that it matters to you."

He didn't even look up. "I'm just along for the ride, remember?"

"I know," I sighed. "Business."

When he didn't answer me, I went into the office to handle some paperwork. He joined me a little while later to talk about tools. He wanted better equipment in the garage, but we couldn't afford it, not yet. I promised that we'd get what he needed as soon as we could.

I was home not long before Scott. After giving him a kiss hello I warned him that Frasier would be coming by before dawn, and told him about neither one of my boys answering the phone when I called them.

"Cut him some slack," he suggested.

"Everyone keeps telling me that," I muttered.

"Did they do anything worse than me?"

"Yeah," I said firmly. "They didn't give me a chance to apologize."

"You didn't try calling me," he pointed out, "you came and found me."

"I tried to give you a chance to calm down because you were really mad."

"You didn't try calling me," he repeated.

I refused to point out that he'd left his phone at home. "I was trying to give you a chance to calm down."

"You should be mad at all of us or none of us," he told me.

"I wasn't mad at any of you," I replied honestly. "I wanted to apologize to them and they didn't give me a chance. Anyway, that's why Frasier's coming by this morning."

He shook his head like he still didn't agree that I wasn't angry, but went off to take a shower without arguing the point any further.

Frasier came in around five-thirty, smelling like Nancy's cologne. After confirming that he'd had a good time with her, I said what I had to say. "I'm sorry. I probably should have told you what the opportunity was for me to regain my memory, but it's a moot point now because it doesn't matter."

He gave me a confused look. "Why doesn't it matter?"

"Because I don't intend to pursue it," I replied calmly.

He wasn't satisfied with that answer. "What was the opportunity?"

"Malcolm Robbins showed up at the pub."

His head shot up like a rocket. "And you didn't tell me immediately why?"

"You were working and I'd already gotten a 'K' answer out of you," I reminded him. "Plus I'd been chastised more than once about bugging you guys."

"That's because you asked if I was okay, how work was going," he shot back. "Its work, it goes. Malcolm however, showing up out of the blue...."

"Like I need you to beat up someone else at the pub," I said irritably. "Logan was there, it was okay."

"You hired me to protect you," he reminded me.

I shook my head. "He didn't try to hurt me."

"Did you know that going into it?" he demanded.

"No, but Logan was there," I repeated. "Anyway, he showed up and offered to give me my memory back."

"Okay, and you told him no?" he growled.

I shook my head. "He gave me a few days to think about it. I didn't need two days. I expect to see him tomorrow night."

He nodded firmly. "Great."

"There's no reason for you to be there," I warned him.

"I'll be there," he said in a level voice that told me he wasn't going to listen to reason.

I thought about trying to force him to stay away, but then I remembered what Logan had said about Frasier needing to be a part of my life. Christina had hired Frasier to protect her, the least I could do was let him protect me. "Okay, but you will not start a fight in the pub again."

He agreed readily enough. After warning him to answer his phone next time, I told him to go to bed. When he was gone I stood looking after him for a moment. I wondered how Christina had managed to control him, but since I wouldn't be getting my memory back, I knew I had to figure it out myself.

## Epilogue

BUT THE HARDEST THING TO COMPREHEND  
IS IF I HAD IT TO DO OVER I'D DO IT AGAIN

TRISHA YEARWOOD - TOO BAD YOU'RE NO GOOD

Saying no to Malcolm was almost anticlimactic. Scott and Frasier went with me to the bar. I warned my ghoul to behave, and he promised that he wouldn't start anything. I wasn't sure I believed him, but if he didn't, I could handle him.

Malcolm was waiting with his mage friends and the big green guy who was wearing a hooded robe. They were sitting at the same table they'd been at a few nights ago, and Malcolm rose when I entered the bar. Scott and Frasier found a table nearby while I walked over to sit down with Malcolm and his friends.

"Good evening," I said politely, including them all in my greeting.

"Good evening," Malcolm replied. "Have you thought about my proposal?"

"Yes, I have," I told him. "I've thought about it quite a bit." I hesitated for only a moment, just long enough to smile at Scott before turning back to Christina's old friend. "I'd like to thank you for your offer, but I'm fine the way I am."

He seemed disappointed I think but he also seemed relieved. "Very well."

I could have asked him lots of questions, about why he thought I'd be safe here, why he hadn't trusted Christina's family in Salem, how he'd managed to warp time so that I ended up here long after she had disappeared from Russia. Since I'd opted not to get my memory back, I was sure he would never answer them. It was time for me to put Christina's life behind me and not look back.

"Again, I thank you for your offer," I repeated as I got to my feet.

He pulled out a thick coin and tossed it to me. It looked like nothing I'd ever seen before. "If you need me use this. You will remember the word."

I smiled and slid it into my pocket. "Thank you. Good evening."

On the way to the door with his friends, Malcolm nodded at Frasier. "O'Connell."

Frasier met his eye without flinching. "Malcolm."

I stood there and watched the last best chance at regaining my memory walk out the door and I realized I honestly didn't care. I'd made my choice and I wasn't going to look back. I watched them leave with a smile and went to sit down with Scott and Frasier.