



RECLAIMING
Brenda's Story

Acquainted with the Night

*I have been one acquainted with the night.
I have walked out in rain- and back in rain.
I have out walked the furthest city light.*

*I have looked down the saddest city lane.
I have passed by the watchman on his beat
And dropped me eyes, unwilling to explain.*

I have stood still and stopped the sound of feet.

*When far away an interrupted cry
Came over houses from another street,*

*But not to call me back or say good-bye;
And further still at an unearthly height,
One luminary clock against the sky*

*Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right
I have been one acquainted with the night.*

Robert Frost

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Part 1

Chapter 1: Michael

*"And if you said
This life ain't good enough
I'd give my world to lift you up
I'd change my life
To better wit your mood
Because you're so smooth."*

*Santana w/Rob Thomas
"Smooth"*

"I believe the lady asked you to let her go," the tall blonde man said simply.

I glanced up quickly from my computer terminal and stared in disbelief at the trio that stood a few feet inside the lobby. I thought everyone in Las Vegas knew better than to mess with Anthony Cordelone. So what was this guy doing? I knew the stranger had only checked into the hotel about a half an hour ago because I was the one who handled it. From my position behind the front desk at Caesar's Palace, I saw many things ranging from the gorgeous to the bizarre and right now this man, Michael Moorecock, was surprisingly both.

"Buzz off, buddy," Anthony said gruffly as he glared at Michael from under long dark bangs. Without another thought he once again pulled the beautiful woman by his side toward the entrance of the hotel.

I felt bad for her. I had seen her around the hotel for the past few days and I knew she had been a guest many times before. Her name was Cordelia Matthews and she was a talent agent from Los Angeles. They were both dressed in formal attire; Anthony in a tuxedo and Cordelia in a stunning navy silk gown that made her look like the stars she represented. I wasn't sure how she'd managed to hook up with Anthony but I imagined that she was regretting her choice in dinner companions right now.

Michael moved incredibly fast to position himself between the couple and the front door. "What part of that didn't you understand?" he practically growled as he settled into a powerful stance, apparently undaunted by the fact that Anthony Cordelone was at least five inches taller than him and probably sixty pounds heavier. Not to say he couldn't hold his own, though. Michael was close to six feet tall himself and built like a football player. His hair was stylishly cut and stuck up in gelled spikes. His suit was an impeccably tailored pinstripe that was probably Armani and made him look like the high rollers I saw every day at the hotel.

I knew trouble was about thirty seconds away and my supervisor would have a fit if he found out a fight had occurred in the front lobby during my shift and I hadn't done anything to stop it. What was I supposed to tell him, that I was so enthralled by Michael's gallantry that I forgot it was my job to keep situations like this out of the hotel? Caesar's Palace was known for its glamour and flashy lights, not street fights.

I was just about to call security when all of a sudden Anthony dropped his companion's hand and moved without another word toward the door and simply left. I couldn't believe it much less explain it. Anthony was a member of one of the few Mafia families left in Las Vegas. He wasn't known for letting anyone walk over him. Had I missed something? Maybe the other man had flashed a weapon or something and Anthony didn't want to be bothered with the nuisance. That had to be it.

"Are you okay?" Michael was asking the young woman as he took one of her hands and held it loosely in his. His compassion was amazing for someone who looked like he belonged in a ruthless boardroom.

"Yes, thank you," she said with a hand at her delicate throat. "I can't believe he gave up like that. I was so frightened."

"Are you a guest? Should I call you a cab?" I was relieved to know that he was a gentleman, more than anyone could say for Anthony Cordelone. Every cocktail waitress and souvenir photographer on The Strip knew not to buy his line of bull much less take him up on his invitation for a drink when they got off. I found myself wondering what had brought the two of them together.

"No, I'm staying here, thank you for your concern." She was flashing Michael a fabulous smile as she smoothed her auburn hair that had been piled artistically on the top of her head. "Contrary to this display, I am usually not this stupid. Mr. Cordelone was quite insistent that I accompany him back to his penthouse and was rather upset when I refused. Thank you again for your help. My name is Cordelia Matthews." She held out her free hand and Michael took it to shake it gently.

"Michael Moorecock. And the pleasure is all mine. Are you sure you're okay? Maybe I should take you to your room." He glanced in my direction then and smiled at me warmly as he gave me a friendly wink.

I returned his smile, feeling like a peeping tom, and fought the urge to react like a lovesick puppy at his attention. I remembered being profoundly affected by this man whom I had only met earlier that evening. When he had checked in I had been impressed by how nice he was to me. I didn't delude myself into thinking that guests like Michael cared about anything except that they got a room on the right side of the building or had enough towels in the morning. But there was something genuine about the way he'd asked how I was that warmed me to him instantly. I couldn't explain it. It was like a natural magnetism that I'd never experienced before.

"No, really I'm fine," the Cordelia was saying. "Would you like a drink? It's the least I can do. You defended me after all." Michael smiled as he took her hand that he still held and tucked it into his elbow. They turned and Michael ushered her toward one of the many bars on the ground floor of the casino. I had to admit that they made a good looking couple. Instead of her auburn hair detracting from Michael's blonde it made them appear as if they'd been paired together since birth.

Even now I can remember the jealousy I had felt watching Michael and Cordelia that night. In spite of the fact that I worked at the hotel, I had wanted to be the one on his arm, the one his was giving his attention to. Michael has that way about him. He's an All-American boy with an underlying tone of power that would deter any street thug within a five-block radius.

I saw him every night after that one. He approached me the next evening and asked if I could help him with a few things, paperwork mostly. Even though it was my job to do what I could for him or any other guest of the hotel, I made sure I was at the desk whenever he stepped off the elevator or the one who answered any phone requests he made. I felt like a fool every time my coworkers razed me for jumping through hoops for some guy but I couldn't help it. I was hopelessly attracted to him and took whatever excuse I could to be with him. I never admitted to myself though, much less anyone else.

And in some ways it had paid off. Soon doing only little things for Michael turned into a genuine interest on his part. He asked me out under the guise that he wanted to repay me for all my help and we had romantic dinners for two in secluded restaurants that were off The

Strip. The first time he picked me up I felt like a princess when he put his hand at the small of my back to escort me to the waiting limousine. He always had flowers, usually roses, when he came to pick me up or when I went to his suite for something.

I hadn't felt protected like that by anyone since I was a little girl. Michael was always a gentleman and never made any inappropriate advances even though I was more than ready to make a few of my own. He hadn't done anything other than kiss me at the end of the evening and I became more frustrated with him everyday.

I thought Michael had feelings for me. He had hinted around the issue often enough but I felt as if there was something important about himself that he wasn't sharing with me. It felt like he was holding something back that I couldn't put a finger on. He was a night owl like myself so I never found it odd that I never saw him during the day. Michael said he was busy with meetings and lunches and couldn't get away to visit and I worked in the early evenings. Michael and I spent time together after I got off work and I found myself counting the minutes until I saw him.

I'll never forget the first time we made love. I wasn't a virgin by any means but I felt like I was reborn that first night I spent in Michael's arms. He was a gentle lover that always took me to new heights every time we were together and there was something animal about the way that he kissed my neck.

The morning after our first night together Michael told me he wanted me to work for him full time. I promptly quit my job and Caesar's Palace but for some reason kept my apartment. Michael never offered for me to move into the suite at the hotel with him and I didn't know what to make of it. He never said anything about finding a more permanent place to live or if he was going to return to where he'd come from before. If I asked where he was from Michael only made vague references that didn't tell much.

Michael began spending a great deal of time with a Spanish gentleman and I couldn't figure that out either. Michael and I had been seeing each other for about four months when Antonio Moreno began sharing meals with us a few times a week. I thought he was a charming man even though he dressed like an eccentric actor in tapestry vests and frock coats. He always wore his long black hair secured at the nape of his neck and carried a cane. He treated me with respect but never made a real effort to include me in their conversations.

When I voiced my concerns to Michael that his friend didn't like me he laughed and told me not to worry. "Antonio is always like that when he doesn't know someone well," he said but I knew he was lying. Later I would find out it wasn't that Antonio didn't like me for me but that he didn't like what I was, human.

Something happened about a month later and Michael began to change. I never really found out what it was that tipped me off but he started to pull away. If I questioned him about what was wrong he made excuses. One night he was extremely harsh when I'd asked him about a fax that had arrived an hour before and he stormed out of the suite. It was like he was having an internal battle with himself and didn't know what to do about it. He came back an hour later with an armload of red roses and begged me to forgive him. I was sitting in an armchair in his suite when he came in and he dropped to his knees in front of me.

"You're the only sanity in my life," he confessed in a weak voice I'd never heard before. "I need you."

"Michael, tell me what's wrong," I begged. I knew it was big but whatever it was that had Michael so torn up could be fixed. I hated seeing him this vulnerable. I'd known for weeks that I loved him but I was waiting for him to stop acting so weird to tell him. I would soon know the reason why.

His head was buried in my lap and after a moment he lifted it and looked deep into my eyes. "I-I really don't mean to shut you out, honey. God, you don't know how bad I want to tell you. Tell you everything."

My fingers found their way into his hair and I leaned down to kiss his cheek. "Whatever it is you can trust me." I threw caution to the wind and continued, "I love you, Michael. Whatever it is won't change that."

He was silent again and I could see a war being waged in those blue eyes. I knew I'd won when he said, "What I'm about to tell you will change your life forever. Can you handle that?"

"As long as we're together I don't care." I meant it, too. I didn't have anything to lose but him, or so I thought.

Michael rose and crossed the room but continued to keep his eyes on me. Without preamble he said, "I am a vampire."

Chapter 2: After the Bomb

*“Can you throw away
everything you’ve lived for?”
Better Than Ezra
“In the Blood”*

Before Michael, my life had been normal for a girl born and raised in Las Vegas. My mom died when I was five from ovarian cancer so it was just me and my dad. Jeffery Thompson was a firefighter and he worked really hard to make sure I had a better life.

I graduated in the top ten percent of my high school class and went on to the University of Nevada-Las Vegas. I received my Bachelor of Sciences in Tourism in four years and got an entry-level position at Caesar's Palace that summer.

For the next six years I steadily worked my way up the ladder. I loved my job and I was good at it. I met people from all over the globe who came to vacation in Las Vegas and took pride in making their stay a happy one. My superiors must have thought the same thing because I received many awards for excellence and the bonuses weren't bad either.

I also knew a few members of the Mafia families that still held interests in the big money town, including the Cordelones, and knew who to stay away from. During those six years I'd also dated a few guys but it was never anything major. Don't get me wrong. I didn't lead a chaste life but I had more important things on my mind. Dad's illness was beginning to surface by then and I knew the medical bills would soon start piling up.

My father was diagnosed with lung cancer the year I turned twenty-five. All those years of fighting fires finally caught up with him but thankfully it had been detected in time. Doctors removed part of his left lung three months later and we thought he was out of the woods.

The cancer came back when my father went in for a routine physical. I had just gone to work for Michael so I spent my days doing things for him and my dad and at night I was with Michael. He was understanding that I needed to help my father and never stood in my way.

Even with everything Michael gave me I never expected for him to tell me that he was a vampire.

I was shocked at first when I found out about Michael. I mean come on, who wouldn't freak out to learn that not only did vampires exist but that they were dating one? After the initial shock wore off I needed time to think and Michael was very gracious. When I was ready he answered all my questions without hesitation.

It had happened when he was still in college and my heart broke when he said that he hadn't been given a choice. Some guy just came up and grabbed him, bit his neck then made Michael drink his blood. The next thing Michael knew he had a serious problem with sunlight and a craving for necking with young coeds.

Michael also told me what he knew about vampire society. He traveled to Mexico soon after his embrace where he met a female vampire that taught him a lot about what he was. He said she was an Assamite, a group of vampires that were hired assassins. He said that there were many groups, called clans, which made up their society. From what he had been told they were descendants of Caine who was cast into the land of Nod for killing his brother, Abel. It surprised me to know that all vampires are progeny of that cursed biblical figure but I didn't comment.

Michael didn't know what clan his was because his sire hadn't stuck around long enough to tell him. If he had to guess though, he thought the man was Ventrue. That clan, Michael explained, were businessmen and politicians and that was what Michael had been going to college for, that paired with the fact that his father was a tycoon himself and Michael stood to inherit all his holdings when he died.

When he was done with his explanation, Michael told me the one thing that could have bonded me to him. He loved me. Nothing else mattered. It soon came to pass that Michael asked me to become his ghoul and live with him forever. I would cease to age as a regular mortal and I would gain special abilities from his blood. Best of all, I would still be able to be out in daylight. That meant I could still look out for my father.

When I made inquiries into being made a vampire Michael said that even though he loved me and wanted us to be together, he wouldn't damn me to the unlife that he was cursed with even though I wanted it with all my being. And after a while, I stopped asking. I didn't care as long as I could be with him.

I deluded myself into thinking that one day Michael would change his mind and realize that it didn't matter, especially to me, what he was and that he would make me like him. He would come to realize that what we had surpassed any feelings of being damned because what we had was pure and beautiful. What I failed to see at the time was that Michael liked me to be dependent on him.

I found out that Antonio was Michael's adopted sire and that was what linked the two together. Before Michael came to Las Vegas he had no real knowledge of the Camarilla or the rules that they lived by. The Camarilla is a group of seven of the thirteen different clans of vampires who bound themselves together after the Inquisition started in the twelfth century. They thought it smart to devise a way to live parallel with mortals as a way of living longer, in other words, not to be hunted. They created a system of rules and punishments called The Masquerade and it has survived ever since.

While his first teacher had shown Michael many things about his new existence, she wasn't from a clan affiliated with the Camarilla and thought the knowledge unnecessary. So when Antonio approached Michael a few nights after his arrival in Las Vegas and asked why he hadn't presented himself to the Prince of the city, Michael didn't know what he was talking about.

Antonio was allowed to take Michael under his wing and they became good friends. Michael was accepted into Kindred society and he was making many new friends. I found out that Kindred is what the vampires called themselves.

So I accepted Michael's offer and became his ghoul and life was good. We loved each other so much and he gave me everything my heart desired. He even helped me publish a book of poetry that I had been working on since I was in high school and it got rave reviews. He also showed me how to take the money I made off the book and invest it so I would be able to live independently if anything ever happened to him. Like that would ever happen.

One day out of the blue Antonio offered to embrace to me and I jumped at the chance. Michael was going out of town with some influential friends and he had already made it quite clear to me that he wasn't going to do it himself. I foolishly thought that this was the perfect opportunity for us to be together, on equal footing. I wouldn't be dependent on Michael for a monthly feeding that being a ghoul meant and he wouldn't be burdened by knowing he was the one to "change" me. The arrangement seemed good for all of us.

I traveled to Vienna, Austria with Antonio while Michael spent the long weekend in San Francisco. There I met the council of seven elders that lead the Clan Tremere and Antonio was given permission to pass on the dark gift. During the next few weeks Antonio and I grew

very close as he began my tutelage in the ways of our clan. When we returned to America a month later and my hopes were high to see Michael and for him to know of my change. My hopes, however, were quickly crushed.

We had just arrived at the Las Vegas Chantry the night before Michael returned to town with a group of Kindred I had never met. He was helping them deal with a group of hunters who were trying to discredit Antonio and kill Christina Strong whom I found to be my adopted sister. She had been embraced five years previously and was basically dumped in an alley in Las Vegas. She didn't recall her life before her embrace or the embrace itself for that matter. Antonio adopted her in much the same way he had adopted Michael and it warmed me heart when I learned about it. I met her for the first time that night and I was fond of her, immediately. I also met Jason Kline, who was a ghoul at the time, and as it turns out is to marry my sister within the next month.

We traveled with them to San Francisco in Michael's private jet but I didn't get much of a chance to speak to him. I was disappointed to learn that he was very angry with me and didn't try to hide it. But there was a job to do and we didn't have a chance to talk until after a big confrontation at a large Catholic Church downtown between a group of human hunters and ourselves. In the end, Christina found the father she couldn't remember as well as a way to possibly regain the memories she had lost.

Chapter 3: The End of Camelot

*"No matter how hard I try
you keep pushing me aside
and I can't get through"*

*Cher
"Believe"*

Michael, Antonio and I parted company from the rest of the group and at Michael's suggestion we went out to dinner at a small Italian restaurant that reminded me of the ones he used to take me to before I found out what he was. After we were settled at the table, and drinks were ordered, Michael turned to me and asked, "Why, Brenda?" The hurt in his voice cut like a knife but I couldn't help but remember how I had thought that Antonio's offer would solve all our problems. How could I have been so wrong?

I swallowed hard and looked from Michael to Antonio and back again, not wanting to have this conversation in front of my sire. "Michael, I-I was h-hoping you would be happy," I said, weakly, knowing that was the completely wrong thing to say. My hands were knotted in my lap and I stared at them as I continued, "You know this is what I've wanted – for us to be on equal footing so you wouldn't have to worry about me as much."

The situation deteriorated from there. "Brenda, you know that I hate what I am and that was the reason I didn't turn you," his tone was low and sounded like an angry wolf. "At least as a ghoul you had the opportunity to go back to a normal life if you weren't happy with me. Now..." his voice trailed off.

"How could you think that I ever wanted to leave you?" Antonio was beginning to look very uncomfortable and I felt sorry that he had to hear this. "Isn't it enough proof for you that I have done this?" Thankfully, the waitress came with the drinks then and we all had a chance to calm down. "You should be thanking Antonio instead of glaring at him the way you are."

"I can't deal with this," Michael hissed through clenched teeth as he stood and threw a wad of bills on the table. "Enjoy your dinner," he spat, walking away. I watched his back as he stalked out of my line of sight, my bottom lip quivering with unvoiced sobs.

Antonio reached for my hand and squeezed gently, "Do not worry, dear, he will come to his senses. Give him some time." His gaze followed mine as if he too, thought Michael would come right back. We were both wrong.

"I hope you're right." How could he just leave like that? The harshness of his demeanor was something I had never experienced personally before and I knew what Michael was capable of. I had seen him in action many times. "Can we leave, please?"

"Of course, my dear," he said standing and taking my elbow to help me do the same. As we neared the front door, the matre'd approached. "Is everything alright, sir?"

"Yes," Antonio said, slipping an arm around my waist. "My companion is not feeling well. I am afraid we will not be partaking of your establishment this evening. I am very sorry."

"Of course, sir. Just a moment and I will have your car brought up." With that he turned to a valet that had just entered and motioned to him. "Ah, the Lincoln please, Justin." The young man nodded pertly before rotating on his heel to exit the building again.

"The gentleman asked me to give this to you when you left." The matre'd handed me an envelope. I opened it and read the hasty note that Michael scrawled on the restaurant stationary.

Brenda,

I know you think you have done us a favor but I can't look at it that way. With the information I now have, I am looking for a way out of this existence. I know Antonio will treat you well, if not, he will deal with me. I am leaving the jet for the two of you to return to Vegas.

Michael

I put the note back in the envelope and stuck it in the pocket of my coat. Antonio, bless him, never asked what the note said as the two of us left the restaurant and went directly to the airport. We had no further business in San Francisco so we flew back to Las Vegas where I continued my studies. I tried to put Michael's rejection behind me as I dove into becoming the best Tremere I could. I didn't succeed in any way but I did the best I could to put up a good front and Antonio was very supportive.

Michael never contacted me after he left us in San Francisco and I resigned myself to thinking that we were through. About six months later I received the first bouquet of roses. Michael would include a small note that never told me anything other than he was still alive and thinking of me. I felt like a child that had been dumped off in boarding school and daddy checked in from time to time to see that I was all right. Then the invitation came.

Chapter 4: Salem

*"So I held my head up high
hiding hate that burns inside
which only fuels their selfish pride"*

Creed

"My Own Prison"

Beth Bathori was the Prince of Salem, Massachusetts and a fellow member of the Tremere clan. She sent an invitation for Antonio and I to come for dinner on Halloween. My sire knew of the woman but had never met her. He said that declining the summons to Salem would be rude so we prepared to make the trip to the East Coast.

Michael had received an invitation as well and phoned Antonio to discuss the situation. He never asked to speak to me and I was crushed but I resigned myself to not letting him know. Silently, my heart soared at the thought of seeing him again but I knew nothing had changed. Michael was still angry that I was a vampire and I still loved him. It was a stalemate that could last for eternity.

Michael stopped in Las Vegas to collect Antonio and myself and the three of us flew to Boston together. The trip was strained to say the least. Conversation was scarce, except between Michael and Antonio. I sat in a seat next to a blackened window and pretended to look out it, barely containing myself from launching into a verbal tirade against Michael. How could he treat me this way? I began to have doubts that he had ever loved me at all. I began to doubt my very existence and what I would do if Michael never came to his senses.

We arrived in Boston late that night and decided to stay the day at a hotel there and head to Salem the next evening. To my surprise about an hour before sunrise, Michael asked if I would take a walk with him. Finally he was giving me some acknowledgement. I agreed, probably too quickly, and we left the hotel to walk toward downtown.

"How have you been?" he asked after a few blocks.

"Fine," I replied slowly. "My studies are going well. Antonio is a good teacher but I know he gets impatient sometimes."

Michael laughed good-naturedly. He was looking down at the sidewalk as we went along. This felt so good. It was like nothing had changed between us but I couldn't help remembering that it had. "I know what you mean. I bet you're a better pupil than I was, though. I always wanted to check stock prices and the old man would threaten to take a hammer to my laptop or burn the Wall Street Journal."

I laughed at the thought, fighting the urge to take his hand. "As a matter of fact," I reflected, "he usually ends up making a comment like, 'At least you pay attention.'" We laughed together and I couldn't believe how easily I fell back into the role I had with him. I knew I still loved him, but was that enough to get us through? Could he come to terms with the fact that I was Kindred, the same as him?

Michael sobered and stopped. "God, I miss you," he said lowly as he turned to face me.

We had reached a deserted parking lot that wasn't well lit. I stopped too and stood mere inches in front of him. If I could breathe, my breath would have been caught in my throat. I reached up and tentatively caressed his cheek. It was still as smooth as it had been the first time I had touched it. "Michael," I breathed.

His hand came up behind my neck in a gesture that was so familiar to me. I knew he was about to kiss me and I was thrilled. When his lips touched mine it was like relighting all the memories that had been haunting my dreams since San Francisco.

I kissed him with everything in my being wanting so show him just how much I still loved and wanted him in my life. I prayed it was enough proof for him. And all too soon, it was over. Michael pulled back and considered me for a moment, then took a step back shoving his hands in the pockets of his suit pants.

"Sorry," he said looking around uncomfortably. "This is confusing enough without letting our primal urges get in the way."

I visibly stiffened. "What kind of game are you playing, Michael?" I raved. "Do you have any idea how much I love you?" I knew I was acting like a fool and didn't care. He couldn't expect to kiss me one minute and pull away the next. It wasn't fair.

"I'm not playing any game, Brenda. I still love you too, but it's not like I can just ignore the fact that you went behind my back and became a monster." I couldn't have felt worse if he had slapped me. Did he think that just because I was Kindred that I was now different? Did I cease to be the woman he loved? Or was I now just a blood-sucking fiend with good fashion sense?

"Well thank you very much for that colorful play by play, Michael," I said cruelly. I turned and began to walk in a different direction than we had been walking in previously. He had really pissed me off. "Rest assured that this 'monster' won't be taking up any more of your time," I tossed over my shoulder.

I had no idea where I was and didn't really care. I came across a small park and entered, desperate for time to cool off.

When I was well into the park, I noticed a small group of people in robes. I realized they were performing a ritual of some kind and I approached them, curious about what they were doing. But that is a story I will tell later.

Beth turned out to be a REALLY big bitch. She wanted the three of us to get a box for her that contained some heavy-duty magical powers and to do so she had captured my Dad and Christina. My sister had been in San Francisco where she was spending time with her father and my Dad was pulled from Las Vegas.

I'll never forget the first time I went down to the dungeon of the Bathori Mansion and saw Christina, hunger in her beautiful eyes. Beth hadn't even bothered to feed Christina in the several days and had my father in the same cell where Christina could have easily gotten to him. I was grateful for Christina's strength and that she hadn't fed from Dad, even though she had every opportunity.

Michael had grabbed Beth right in the hallway of her own basement prison and drained her. Beth hadn't done her homework. Michael wasn't the type of person who took well to threats and especially didn't agree with using helpless people as pawns. With Beth out of the way we released Christina and Dad, who hadn't been exposed to any knowledge of the nature of the woman who had held him so we removed him from the scene quickly and I made sure Christina got something to eat.

Elvira Van Dorn arrived soon after to take over as Prince of the city. She was the Tremere Primogen previously, and is a beautiful dark-skinned woman who takes charge just by being in the room. Elvira was concerned over hearing about the artifact that Beth wanted us to locate for her. She asked if we would be interested in finding it, if only for the fact of destroying it so it didn't hurt anyone.

We agreed and soon found ourselves in Flint, Michigan, a Ventrue controlled city. During the entire expedition, Michael and Antonio treated me like I had never tied my own shoes, much less ever accompanied them on many other excursions such as this one. To put it lightly, I was pissed most of the time. On the lighter side, I expanded the amount of Kindred I knew. Knowledge of our actions in Salem preceded us and that began the reputation I have since become known for.

We ended up finding the box for the Elvira and Antonio destroyed it when we returned. Elvira took me aside when everything was said and done and asked if I wanted to move to Salem for a time and study at the Chantry there. I was still feeling oppressed by Michael and Antonio's actions so I agreed.

I went back to Las Vegas long enough to pack and make sure that my Dad was okay before returning to Salem to take up residence with Elvira at the Bathori mansion.

That was two years ago. My name is Brenda Thompson and this is my story....

Part II

Chapter 5: New Beginnings

*"Can you be so warm?
Can you know what I feel?"
Better Than Ezra
"In the Blood"*

I had been thinking about taking on a ghoulish job ever since Elvira informed me that she was giving the Bathori Mansion to me after the new Chantry was completed. Her child and my good friend Micky George maintained several havens of his own, and Zane - well, he stayed with Elvira. So that left me with a beautiful five-floor mansion to stay in as long as I lived in Salem.

I was also beginning to suspect the honesty of the people handling my investments in Nevada. I had to monitor everything long distance and I had been getting the feeling that there was some skimming going on. I wanted to bring everything to the East Coast, and in order to do that, I needed a daytime person, a ghoulish person.

I awoke one evening in late August, oblivious to the chain of events beginning to unfold before me, and checked my answering machine. There were two messages. The first was from Samantha Brown, a member of the Black Rose Coven that I had become close to in the past two years. She said there was to be a ritual at Rachel's house that Saturday and could I attend? Rachel Black was the priestess of the coven of witches and the mortal descendant of my adopted child, Bruce Blackwell. Samantha also informed me that the coven was getting together that night at the Jesters- a nightclub owned by my friend Micky. It wasn't known as a Kindred hangout and Micky liked to keep it that way.

The second message was from Samantha's uncle, Alec Brown, owner of The Book Exchange, a used book and record store. Alec was a wonderful older gentleman who knew about the Masquerade and Kindred but kept this knowledge to himself, thus staying alive. He also knew about Lupines, Mages and other supernatural beings in the area and kept all our secrets, especially from one another.

I had ordered a rare volume some time ago on the works of Alexander Crowley and Alec had finally found a copy. He said that I could pick it up this evening if it was convenient- he would be there.

I showered quickly and dressed in wool slacks and a bulky white turtleneck. On my way out of the house, I grabbed a jacket out of the hall closet and felt a little naked without the figure-eight holster I normally wore with my pair of Glock 22's. I wasn't too ill at ease because I knew my Ruther PPK was in the glove box of my BMW Roadster in the garage. I engaged the security system and headed out, arriving at Alec's store shortly after 7:00 PM.

When I entered the store I didn't see anyone right away and it took me a minute to find Alec bent over behind the counter, apparently, looking for something.

"Good evening, Alec," I said placing my hands on the counter.

"Miss Thompson," he said with a smile as he straightened. "It's good to see you. How are you?"

"Just fine," I said looking around the tidy store. Alec always made sure the books and records were straight and free of dust. I knew many Kindred who used his numerous contacts to find or replace personal articles from their past, including Micky and Sarah Hamilton, his girlfriend. This store also held frightening memories for me. It was just outside the front door

where some local Brujah had abducted Sarah a few years ago and it was those events that had led to her embrace.

I thought I heard noises from the back room, which I found odd. Alec had someone that worked in the store during the day, but he worked alone nights or special hours when others like me did business with him.

I was intrigued by who could possibly be back there so I used my heightened senses to see what I could find out. Someone was moving things around on shelves. I wondered who it could be. "Did you hire someone for nights?" I asked casually, pulling out my checkbook.

Alec stopped for a moment, as if he didn't know what I was talking about. Just then a rather loud thud could be heard coming from the room and the noise seemed to jar his memory. He smiled and said, "That would be my nephew, Rafael. He just moved back to Salem from New York City." He punched some numbers into the cash register then turned back to me. "That will be \$72.95, Miss Thompson."

"I wish you would call me Brenda," I said as I began to write the check. "You make me feel like an old lady."

"Respect given is as good as respect taken," he said moving from behind the counter. "If you will excuse me, your book is in the back and I should check on Rafe and make sure he hasn't broken anything."

"Okay, Alec," I said as I ripped the check out. I was just slipping the checkbook into my pocket again when I heard them return.

I looked up to see Alec with a rather large volume in his hands. I smiled, thinking that I couldn't wait to get home and devour every word. When I looked past Alec, however, all thoughts of spending the night engrossed in Crowley fled at the sight of Rafe Brown.

He had short, dark hair and a neatly trimmed mustache and goatee. He was tall, at least six feet and well built. He was dressed in dark pants, a white dress shirt and a conservative blue tie. He walked gracefully behind Alec and stood to one side of the counter when Alec held his hand out to take my check. He then printed out a receipt and slipped the book into a bag.

My blue eyes met Rafe's green ones as I took the bag from Alec and I was surprised to see shock there. He seemed to have an oh-that's-what-they-look-like expression on his face and he was studying me. Defensively, I did an aura reading to see if I could tell what he was feeling. To my surprise, swirls of light green and dark blue surrounded his form, telling me he was distrustful and suspicious of me. I wondered why he would be suspicious. We had never met, of that I was sure. Samantha had spoken lovingly of her brother the few times he'd been brought up but I had never even seen a picture of him.

"Miss Thompson," Alec began, "this is my nephew, Rafael. Rafe, Miss Thompson."

"Hello," I said tucking the bag under my arm. "It's nice to meet you. And please, call me Brenda." I smiled at him.

"A flower has blossomed," he said with a smile. "The world's heart core. The petals and leaves were a moon white frame; I gathered the flower, the colorless lore. The abundant measure of fate and fame." My smile grew when I recognized the quote as Yeats, one of my favorite poets.

"You are well read, Mr. Brown," I said turning toward the door. "Perhaps we can speak again." Rafe only returned my smile and I said good evening to Alec as I headed for the front of the store. Curiosity got the better of me and I lingered at a display by the door, still using my heightened senses to see if Rafe made any comments to Alec. I didn't understand why he seemed so leery of me, and I received no further insight when nothing was said. I turned silently and left.

I phoned Micky when I reached my car to tell him I was going to Far East Imports/Exports to work on the books. I had been taking care of them for him ever since he took over the business when Lilith and Marissa died. They tried to overthrow the Prince and met final death for being so stupid. I told him I would only be there for a few hours and he informed me that Sarah was there already.

"Okay," I said. "I'll talk to you later."

"Sure. Don't strain your brain," he said. I chuckled. Micky and I had a great relationship. He was like a brother to me. Sometimes I truly think that if it hadn't been for his friendship, I wouldn't have made it through the past two years. And I was so happy that he and Sarah had each other, even though I thought of Michael and what we had each time I saw them together.

The drive didn't take long and when I got there, I parked next to Sarah's car and let myself in with the key Micky had given me. "Sarah," I called out when I walked into the foyer. The actual showrooms and offices of the business were housed in a beautiful, turn of the century two story home. The extra stock and receiving area was at a warehouse by the docks.

"Brenda?" It sounded like she was in the office space that occupied what would have been the kitchen and breakfast room of the house.

"Hi," I said when I entered the room. It looked like Sarah was doing some filing and she smiled at me as I took off my jacket and hung it on a peg. "How's it going?"

"Fine," she said closing a drawer and opening another. "What are you up to?"

"I just wanted to work on the books for a few hours," I said as I moved behind the desk that I used whenever I was there and turned on the computer. Sarah and I have had a rocky relationship to say the least. When we met, Sarah was still human and she had hated me immediately. She had been a member of The Black Rose Coven along with Samantha and Rachel, and one of the members Michael and I had come across in a park in Boston.

I was angry with Michael and I left him standing next to a parking lot near downtown. Michael, being the overprotective jerk he was, had followed me to make sure I didn't get into any trouble. Soon after I entered the park I came across a small group of people that I later found out were members of the coven. I had used Presence to put the three of them in awe of me so I could feed. I didn't know it but my little mind trick didn't work on Sarah. She knew me for what I was because she had worked for the Inquisition, a group of religious hunters, and for that she wanted me dead. Michael dealt with her so I had no knowledge of it until after.

We of course didn't hurt any of them. We only took what we needed to survive which isn't a horrific process for anyone being fed from. Indeed, it is quite pleasurable.

They returned to Salem and the other members of the coven and now as a result, the entire coven thinks that I am the Goddess incarnate and they all call me Mother. I sometimes help in rituals when my schedule allows but I try to keep my involvement with them to a minimum. When she became Micky's ghoul, Sarah severed her ties with the coven and they still didn't know what had happened to her.

Because of her relationship with Micky, I have really tried to build a friendship with her over the past two years since her embrace. I think we are getting there, but it's a slow process. I get the feeling that Sarah has been to hell and back and that it has nothing to do with the events that led to her embrace.

We chatted easily for a while as I started on my paperwork and Sarah continued filing. I asked her about her friendship with the coven members and asked her if she ever intended

on letting them know she was okay. As the Mother, the coven had asked me several times if Sarah and another missing member, Vivian were all right. Because I already knew about Sarah, I could tell them she was fine and would contact them when she was ready. Since I didn't know about Vivian, I performed a ritual that told me she was in a new place learning different things. The ritual also told me there was someone new in her life and that he was a love interest. They seemed happy with this, and didn't ask again.

"I hadn't really thought about it," Sarah said as she sat on the edge of a desk. "I guess I will someday. There's a lot that I need to learn right now." She looked sincere and I didn't want to push her further.

"I was wondering," I said, changing the subject. "I'm working on a new book of poetry, would you do me a favor and look over a few?" My first book, *The New Night of My Soul*, had done really well and poetry was something that was mine solely. It wasn't an extension of me that Michael created and it wasn't the fact that I was Kindred because of Antonio. The poems were mine and no one could take that away from me.

"Sure," Sarah said eagerly and stood to walk over to the desk where I was sitting. I reached into my purse and pulled out the journal size book I always carried to write in when I thought of something. I showed Sarah two of the newest poems; one about love lost and the other a new life. "These are great, Brenda." Sarah was being truthful, I could tell. I was grateful.

"Thank you," I said simply. I always try not to put too much emphasis on my work, even though it means a lot to me. Sarah's easy acceptance made me feel more at ease. We talked for a while after Sarah had finished the filing and she left to find Micky a little before nine o'clock. I was almost done myself, and when I finished I shut down the computer and locked the front door behind me. The night was clear and beautiful, stars were plentiful and the moon shone bright in the dark sky.

On the way home, I decided it would be fun to hang out with the other members of the coven for a while. Jesters was a mortal club and like I said, Micky made sure of that so I knew I wouldn't be putting anyone in danger by being there. I went home and quickly changed into a lightweight, charcoal sweater dress that wasn't too clingy but emphasized my best features. The change didn't take long and I was out the door again by nine-thirty.

Chapter 6: A Night Out

*"If we kiss
would you tongue slip pass
my lips? Would you run away?
Would you stay? Or would I melt
into you?"*

*Meredith Brooks
"What Would Happen"*

When I arrived at Jesters, Nazareth, one of the coven members, was at the door where he worked as a bouncer. He smiled at my approach and opened the door for me. "Hi," he said as I entered. "The others are here. They have a table near the dance floor."

"Thank you, Nazareth. It's good to see you." I usually kept my contact with the coven to a minimum. Rachel and Samantha were the exception because I like to consider them my friends. I knew we could never be that close, however. Being the Mother had its advantages and disadvantages. And I knew I had to keep the high walls of secrecy up in order to protect these innocents from any harm that being what I am could cause.

I saw Ethan, Micky's ghoul who ran Jesters, and gave him a quick smile that he acknowledged with a nod of his head. He was standing near the door that led to a conference room the clan used sometimes for privacy. A quick glance of the rest of the club revealed no other Kindred I could see but I found the table occupied by the rest of the coven without a problem.

I walked to the table quickly and stood between Rachel and Jared, waiting to be noticed. I looked around and saw that many of them appeared to be in various stages of intoxication, but that didn't stop my eyes from finding Rafe right away. He saw me too and wore the same expression he had in The Book Exchange that said he somehow knew what I was but not how he knew or if he had ever seen one before. Interesting. He was wearing jeans now and a white tank top under a red short-sleeved button down shirt.

Rachel was one of those unfortunates that had consumed much drink and when I placed a hand on her and Jared's shoulders she turned in her seat and said rather loudly, "Mother, it's so good to see you." My heart sank at the volume of her greeting. Her voice was joyous and drew the attention of the rest of the group who smiled in welcome. I was concerned that in her drunken state she would spill beans that I didn't necessarily want on the floor. My gaze remained on Rafe and I was glad to see that he was one of the few that seemed to still have his wits about him. His expression was filled with amusement at my discomfort. Did he know who they thought me to be?

Rachel confirmed my suspicions by saying, "Mother, this is Samantha's brother, Rafael. We have asked him to join our circle, with your blessing of course. We've already told him all about you."

"Have you?" I asked still not breaking eye contact with Rafe, who hadn't looked away either. He was incredibly good looking and I found myself mysteriously attracted to him. Amusement still danced in those green depths and threatened to draw me in. I decided to try to read his aura to get an idea of what he was thinking. The colors shifted from deep red to light green then dark blue with a hint of silver, telling me he was confused but lustful and distrustful as well as suspicious and a little sad.

Jared leaned over and said to Rachel quite loudly, "Rachel, you're being too loud, quiet down." Rachel seemed to realize where we all were and looked at me apologetically. I smiled

down at her and squeezed her shoulder before leaving her side to take the only remaining chair at the table. It just happened to be next to Rafe. On my way around the table, I stopped to kiss Samantha on the cheek and ask her how she was. She too appeared to be sober and I noticed that her 'friend' Simon sat next to her.

"I'm fine," she said with the charm that reminded me of a schoolgirl. "Isn't it great? Rafe has moved back to Salem from New York. He's staying with me for now, until he can find a place."

"Yes," I said looking past her to where Rafe sat on her other side. He was still watching me. I straightened and continued to the empty chair. Rafe stood and held it for me as I sat. Very gentlemanly, I thought to myself as a waitress arrived to take my order. "White wine," I said briskly to the smiling woman. "And whatever they want. Start a tab, I'll take care of it."

"Sure, Miss Thompson." She left quickly to get the drinks and I noticed a group of people across the room, playing pool. I thought I recognized one of them from the Cenaculum, an Inquisition member. Great. I hoped she and her friends wouldn't try anything, I didn't need any trouble tonight.

Rafe and Samantha didn't order another round, so I thought either they didn't drink or they had had their fill. Come to think of it, I had never seen Samantha drink a drop of alcohol, I thought.

"It's nice to see you again," I said to Rafe after the waitress left.

"Good to see you, too," he cleared his throat, "Miss Thompson." Oh yeah, he didn't believe the Mother story at all.

"Please call me Brenda. You make me feel like an old school marm."

He smiled and cleared his throat again. It looked as if he were going to say something but just then Samantha leaned forward and said, "Rafe worked for Doubleday, Brenda. I know how you like to read, maybe he knows some of your favorite authors."

My heart sank. Doubleday was the publishing house that handled the release of my first book. He may know more than I thought, but I smiled and tried to act cool. "Really," I said to Samantha, hoping my voice didn't shake too much, then to Rafe, "What department did you work for?"

He couldn't have shocked me more with his response. "'Justice has no will of the pen,'" he started and my smile fell away. "'Tell me your thoughts and I will administer to your will 'til the day I die.'" Lines from my own work. This could be really bad.

"Interesting," I said flatly. The drinks arrived and I took a sip to have a moment to collect my thoughts. When I looked at him again, the amusement was still there and his aura still read the same. I was relieved. "There is a park next door. Would you care to take a walk with me?"

"Sure," he said standing and holding my chair, he was very calm about the whole thing and I wasn't sure if I should be worried. We excused ourselves and assured everyone that we would be back soon. God, I prayed he wasn't a hunter and that I hadn't just signed my own death warrant.

On the way to the door we were intercepted by the girl I recognized earlier from the Inquisition. "Rafe," she said as she hugged him warmly, and I felt a stab of jealousy rush through me. Knock it off, I scolded myself, feeling like a teenager.

Then reality hit. If he knew her maybe he was a hunter who, even though he thought me attractive, wanted nothing more than to kill me. Just as I was about to pull away, Rafe moved to stand a little in front of me as if to block me from the girl's view. The action was

protective in nature and made me relax. "Aislynn. Good to see you, it's been a long time. I'd love to stay and chat but I was just leaving. Maybe I'll see you later?"

"Of course," she said, taking a step back and almost tripping. Rafe held her arm firmly to steady her. She appeared to have had a few cocktails this evening, too. "You and your girlfriend have a good night. It was good to see you." And she walked away. I hoped there weren't any covert signals in the conversation that would lead to my unwanted final death. I wanted to trust him, he was Samantha's brother after all and I couldn't deny the attraction I had for him. Jesus, I just met this guy and already I wanted to trust him? Christina would laugh at me right now if she were here.

We left the bar quickly and I tried to put my worries aside. Hopefully he didn't try to kill me, but if he did I would do what I could to survive even though I knew I would have to leave Salem because of it. I couldn't stay near Samantha if I killed her brother, regardless of why I did it.

The park was pretty dark and we stayed silent until we were well into it. We followed the footpath, and Rafe stayed close to my side.

"So - what exactly are you?" Rafe finally asked.

I smiled. At least he wasn't leery of the unknown. "I think we both know that."

It was his turn to grin now. "Yes, I think I do. But how? I thought vampires only existed in horror movies and Halloween decorations."

Obviously, I couldn't tell him too much, that would break the Masquerade and mean his certain death. I covered the basics, telling him that my society was made up much like mortal society. We had our deviants and businessmen, singers and writers. We also had leaders and rules that we all had to live by. Rafe was interested and thoughtful about everything I told him. I tried to read his aura to see how he was feeling about what I was telling him but couldn't. It must have been too dark to see properly.

I didn't tell him anything about the clans or too much about our disciplines. I did say some of our physical abilities were more advanced than mortals and Rafe seemed to accept what I told him.

"How long have you been a vampire?" he asked.

"Not long," I replied. "Only a few years. I was a ghoul for about a year before that."

"Good," he exhaled heavily. "I was afraid you were going to say a couple hundred years and I was going to have to make a joke about how well you aged." I laughed. He was really being great about all this. I still wasn't comfortable with him knowing what he knew, but all things considered, the situation could be worse.

Rafe stopped suddenly and turned to look at me with a puzzled expression. "Ghoul? What is that?"

"A ghoul," I started, not sure how to explain. "A ghoul is a person who works for a vampire. The vampire feeds them blood that gives them special abilities. Added strength, the aging process stops and they can still be out in daylight."

"Really. That's interesting." He looked as if he were considering something but didn't say anything. Another silence ensued. "Are ghouls just employees?"

"No. When I was a ghoul I was...involved with my domitor." I knew I sounded silly but I didn't want to explain my relationship with Michael to him.

"Oh? What happened?" he pressed.

I took a moment to consider what to tell him and decided a brief explanation of the truth was the best. "Michael was upset when I was turned. I don't think he could handle the fact that I wasn't reliant on him anymore. He left over two years ago," I said simply.

"What a jerk. You're better off without him."

"Thank you. That's what I keep trying to tell myself." It was true. I'd worked very hard since Michael made his excuses to leave to put the past behind me. I thought I was doing pretty well.

"Look, I know you're not telling me everything," he said after a long moment, "and it's okay. There are probably certain confidences you have to keep. I understand." I smiled and found myself wanting him to draw me into his arms and kiss me. I hadn't felt this way since before my embrace, when Michael and I were together. I walked beside Rafe with my arms crossed in front of me defensively, trying to process my emotions and keep up with the conversation at the same time.

We spent about forty-five minutes in the park and when we returned to Jesters everyone was ready to go home. There were barely enough sober members to safely drive the others home and I found myself escorting Rachel. I didn't want my time with Rafe to come to an end but really didn't know how to prolong it. I handed him a card with my cell phone number printed on it and told him to call me if he needed anything. He took it and put it in his pocket with a small secret smile.

As we made our way to the entrance Micky walked in. "Father," Rachel called out from beside me. I had a hand on her elbow and I was trying to guide her out so she didn't fall and crack her skull. I gave my friend a small smile and a quick nod that he returned as he regarded the rest of the group.

Rafe was behind us and I glanced back to see that he had heard her and was now checking Micky out. I figured if the coven told Rafe about me, they probably told him about Micky as well. Rafe held back a little to follow Micky with his gaze while the rest of us left. I glanced again to see that his hesitation lasted only a minute before he followed the rest of us out the door.

On the way to her house, Rachel giddily informed me that Rafe had been fired from his job at the publishing house because of an affair he had with the boss' son. I was astonished to say the least. "Are you saying he's gay?" I asked her and Rachel giggled drunkenly.

"I don't know for sure. He dated girls in high school but I haven't seen him in a long time." Any hopes of having any kind of relationship with him seemed crushed in that instant. What are you thinking; I berated myself as I pulled into Rachel's driveway. You just meet this guy tonight and here you are having thoughts of relationships with him. Are you nuts?

I pushed all those thoughts aside for the moment as I got Rachel inside and ready for bed. I made sure she took a couple of aspirin before she passed out then left, locking the door behind me. I was unsure what to do after that but I knew I had to report to Elvira the happenings of the evening so I got in my car and headed for the Chantry.

I found her and Zane reading in the library and asked to speak to her alone. Once her puppy left, I turned to Elvira and found that she was looking at me expectantly.

"I met someone very interesting tonight," I began and her eyebrows raised with interest.

"Oh?" she replied.

"Yes. Samantha's Brown's brother, Rafael has moved home and it seems that he has some kind of ability to tell by sight what I was." Elvira took the news calmly and told me that she trusted me to do what I thought right according to Kindred law. She also said that she'd heard of mortals with that ability but hadn't personally been in contact with one. I felt better having told her and we chatted easily for a few minutes before she seemed to remember something.

"I received a phone call earlier," she said peering at me intently. "Angel has asked me if he could move to Salem." Angel was a Kindred that I'd met in Nashville a few years ago. I

didn't know his exact age but I knew he'd been around for a while and that he was involved with the Slayer. Elvira requested that I contacted the Chantry there to ask after his reputation.

"Of course, my Prince," I said and a few minutes later I bid her good night and returned home. I made the call to Nashville and found out that Buffy, the Slayer, had recently dumped him after a two-year relationship. Faith, the Chantry leader, also told me that Angel was a quiet individual who was quite studious. She also said he held vast knowledge in the area of the occult.

I hung around the house for the rest of the night trying to read the Crowley book and checking my cell phone every fifteen minutes to make sure the battery was charged. Rafe never called, and at dawn I went to bed.

I was jarred awake during the day to a struggle going on in my room. There were things being knocked over and I thought I heard glass breaking. I was very groggy but I tried to maintain consciousness for as long as possible. I thought of my gun but couldn't make myself reach for it. My struggles to stay lucid were fruitless, however, and I soon fell back into my dark slumber. Not before I heard a gun go off, though.

Chapter 7: Things That Go Bump

*"I've got this feeling you're not gonna stay
it's burning within me
the fear of losing
of slipping away
it just keeps getting closer"
Backstreet Boys
"Don't Wanna Lose You Now"*

When I awoke again it was dark in the room and it took me a full minute to realize that what I heard during the day had to be true. I reached into the bedside table drawer and pulled out the Glock I kept there and left the bed on the opposite side from the door. I made my way backward to the wall that separated the bedroom from the bath and groped until I came to the opening and felt for the light switch. I hoped that with the light behind me it would have little to no influence on my ability to see.

A rectangular shaft of light illuminated the room to reveal the after affects of a struggle. The chair that had sat nearest to the bathroom had been knocked over and as I approached the bed I saw blood on the cream carpet. I looked over the bed to the door and saw a jean clad leg and realized that the body it belonged to was propped against the bedroom door. I took a few more cautious steps forward to see if I could identify my unwanted houseguest and was horrified to see that it was Rafe. His abdomen was blood covered, and from what I could tell the wound was in his side.

I went to him immediately and dropped to my knees, letting the gun fall to the floor beside me. I pushed his shirt and jacket aside and saw the wound was indeed in his side and it looked as if he had lost a lot of blood. His breathing was shallow but there and I thought he was coming around. I touched his cheek and his head moved of his own volition. I dropped my fangs without thought and pierced my wrist then held it to his lips.

"Drink," I urged, holding his head to the only thing I could think of that could save his life. I felt guilty taking him on this road that would leave him one step blood bound to me but I knew it was necessary. He drank deeply and I watched the wound stop bleeding and close somewhat. I felt behind him with my other hand but couldn't feel an exit wound so I knew that the bullet was still inside of him. I wasn't sure how much blood to give him so I pulled my bleeding wrist from his mouth and quickly licked the wound closed.

"Brenda," he said thickly, I almost didn't understand him. "S-s-she was going to k-kill yo-"

"Shh," I cooed, rearranging Rafe so that he lay on the floor away from the door, I hoped more comfortably. His leg was bent oddly and was probably broken. I reached to the bedside table and picked up the cordless phone from its base. Quickly, I called Audrey, a fellow Tremere and someone I knew I could call on to help at a time like this. I told her the situation as fast as possible.

"Okay, you did the right thing. Hold on and I'll get someone there. Is the bullet out?"

"No," I said, fear rising up in me. Was that bad? At this point my wits had totally left me and I was on the verge of a melt down.

"Give him more blood then," Audrey urged. "Help will be there soon." And she hung up. I fed him more and as Audrey said, the bullet popped out and the wound finished closing.

"S-so strong," Rafe was raving. Thank God he wasn't moving too much. "She w-was so s-strong."

"It's alright," I said soothingly. "You're safe now. Everything is going to be alright." There were scratches on his face that I quickly licked closed. He was coming around now, his eyes were opened and didn't look as glazed as I thought they would be.

"Brenda!" Micky's voice boomed from the first floor.

I reached up and opened the door a few inches. "Up here, Micky." Seconds later, I heard multiple footfalls on the stairs and then he was in the doorway, Audrey and another man behind him. My attention, however, was on Rafe.

"I followed you home," he was saying weakly, his face contorted in pain. "I went home and got some sleep but came back this afternoon. There was a woman, she knew the security code and went in." He coughed. "S-she left the door wide open. I followed her in and up the stairs. She went into a room across the hall and then came back out as I reached the top of the stairs. Then she came in here." He looked around to indicate this room. I noticed his voice grew weaker the more he spoke. He was still in a lot of pain from the broken leg. "She said, 'You can't have him, he's mine.' She was going to shoot you." His eyes became instantly clear as he raised his hand and tentatively touched my cheek and I held it in my own.

"It's alright," I told him again. "Don't talk now. You've been shot, and your leg is broken. Rest now and we will talk about this later." His lids grew heavy and closed; his hand went slack in mine. He was unconscious.

"Give me a minute to throw clothes on," I said getting to my feet and crossing to the bathroom.

"We'll get him downstairs," Micky said moving to lift Rafe's shoulders, while the other man carefully lifted his legs. Quickly, I dressed in a pair of jeans and a sweatshirt. I pulled my long brown hair back in a ponytail at the top of my head as I left the bedroom and went downstairs.

Rafe remained unconscious on the ride to the doctor's house. Dr. Kincaid was a local physician with a fully equipped clinic in his basement. He knew of the Masquerade and his services were called upon in times like these when our supernatural vitae wasn't enough to heal a wound.

After a thorough examination, Dr. Kincaid announced the gunshot in Rafe's side was fine. It would be sore until tomorrow and the scar would fade in time. He was preparing to set Rafe's leg when Micky asked to speak to me in the hall.

I was hesitant to leave Rafe, he had saved my life after all, but he was still out of it so I nodded my head in agreement and followed Micky out to the hall, leaving Audrey and her friend to watch over things.

"What happened?" he asked as soon as I shut the door behind us.

"I woke during the day to a struggle in the room," I started, crossing my arms over my chest. "I heard a gunshot and I tried to stay awake but couldn't. When I awoke this evening, I found Rafe leaning against the door, shot in the side." I knew the story was short and didn't tell much, but it was all I had.

Micky focused his gaze to the floor and thought for a moment. "How do you know him?" he asked when he returned his attention to me.

"I just met him last night," I said, turning to look and the door that led to where Rafe was being treated. "He's Samantha Brown's brother. Somehow he knew what I was." Micky's expression changed from concern to dangerous. "I already informed Elvira about him."

"Good." Micky seemed to relax a bit. After another silence he added, "You don't know who it was that broke in?"

"No. He kept mumbling about a woman that came in and had a gun but he was pretty out of it." I didn't know for sure if I wanted to believe the story Rafe told in his delirious state. I certainly didn't like the idea of some stranger just walking into my home intending to kill me. "I will talk to him when he's a little more lucid."

"Fine. I contacted Caine Security on the way to the house. They should be there now checking things out."

"Okay," I replied relief heavy in my voice. I was about to ask Micky if he had heard of any new supernaturals in the area when a loud crash sounded in the room and a frantic voice that sounded like Rafe rose in alarm.

I threw open the door and found Rafe, fully conscious now, still on the examination table but looking at Audrey's companion in horror and disbelief. He was bare chested and had only a sheet spread over his lap; his clothes were in a useless heap next to the bed. The doctor had cut them off earlier.

"What's going on in here?" I asked entering the room and going to Rafe's side. He seemed to relax a little when he saw me but still kept a worried eye on the other man.

"I'm not sure." Audrey moved to put herself between the two men as well. "He regained consciousness just a moment ago and when he saw Elijah he got spooked."

I glanced quickly around the room and found that Dr. Kincaid's wheeled instrument tray had been knocked over. That was probably the crash I'd heard from the hallway. Rafe's leg appeared to have been set, but there wasn't a cast. I guessed my blood had helped to heal that as well after the bone had been properly set. I turned my attention to him and asked, "Are you alright?"

He nodded as Audrey, Elijah and the doctor quietly left the room and closed the door behind them. "That guy is a werewolf isn't he?"

I glanced over my shoulder to the closed door. Elijah? A werewolf? Interesting. "I don't know," I answered honestly, turning back to him. "Was he?" He looked much better than he had an hour ago. His face still looked strained and a little pale but his eyes held the same vivacity they had the previous night. He will be okay, I told myself.

"You mean, you don't know?" he asked accusingly and pointed his finger toward the door. "Come on, how could you not? It's written all over him."

"Sorry. I'm not gifted with your sight, apparently." I took another step closer to the bed and leaned my hip against it.

Rafe looked as if he didn't know whether to believe me or not. "Really?"

I nodded mutely, looking down at my hands suddenly bashful. The door opened again, it was the doctor and he had an armful of clothes in his hands. "I don't know if any of these will fit," he said holding the stack out to me. "It's all I have."

"We'll make something work," I replied, laying the clothing on the bed next to Rafe. "Thank you."

"Yes. Thank you, Doctor. For everything."

The doctor excused himself as I checked out the clothes lying on the bed. "Can you manage?" I asked.

"I think so," Rafe said as he bent his leg at the knee, testing his mobility; inadvertently, showing much more leg than I had yet seen. I turned my head in embarrassment, pretending to study the wall as the doctor left the room again. I pushed away from the bed and walked to the door as Rafe stood and began to pull on clothes. I tried to convince myself that I wanted to give him his privacy but I didn't want to go too far in case he needed me. Who was I kidding? I felt exhilarated to be in the same room with him in this state of undress. He was a vibrant man and I hadn't felt this attracted to anyone in a long time. Two years to be exact.

But what could this mean? Sure, he knew I was Kindred and he seemed okay with it, but could he possibly ever think of me as someone worth caring for? Thinking like this is nonsense, I scolded myself. He will come to think of you as a monster, just like those religious killers at St. Stephen's. That was the Cenaculum house here in Salem that's real purpose was to kill beings like myself and others like werewolves and fairies. Find out what he knows about the person who tried to kill you and let him go. That's what my head told my heart but that already fragile organ was feeling rebellious that night.

Rafe dressed and we caught a ride back to my house from Micky. I was only half-aware of leaving the doctor's house, much less the ride to the mansion. I was having an argument with myself over whether or not to just forget about finding out what Rafe knew and just asking him to go home, that we could talk later. Micky settled the matter for me.

"Call me later," he said as I got out of his car. "I want to know what he has to say."

Rafe was already out of the car and half way to the front door so I wasn't worried that he would hear the conversation. "Okay," I replied, not wanting to argue. I closed the door and walked the short distance to the front of the house where Rafe waited. I noticed the Caine Security van sitting in the driveway and was glad to know that I wouldn't be alone with Rafe in the house. I wasn't sure I could trust myself not to jump him, and not for blood.

The door was unlocked and I led Rafe in the front hall. "This is really a beautiful house," he commented. "My cousin Brian and I used to wonder what it was like in here."

"Really?" I asked, motioning for him to enter the study. "I have to admit that I was pretty intimidated when I first came to live here. Houses like this one tend to take on lives of their own." We entered the room and I moved to stand next to the fireplace on the other side of the room.

"I agree. Brian and I always thought the house was haunted." Rafe was laughing as he stood near the couch and it gave me a moment to take him in and what I saw unnerved me. I hadn't really taken the time to look at the clothes that Rafe put on at the doctor's house earlier. The white tee shirt fit okay but the jeans were way too small. In fact, they looked painfully small. I also realized I heard something I hadn't heard in at least two years. Rafe's stomach was growling.

"Are you hungry?" I asked suddenly, feeling stupid that I hadn't remembered he would be famished after the amount of healing he had just went through. Then I remembered something else, there wasn't any food in the house, what in the hell was I going to feed him?

Rafe looked incredibly embarrassed as he brought up his hand to cover his lower abdomen, "Actually, I am."

"Do you like pizza?" That was all I could think of. Pizza was my favorite food when I was mortal and more importantly, it could be delivered.

"Sure," he said with a shrug, not sounding very enthusiastic.

"Would you like something else?" How could anyone NOT like pizza?

"No, that's fine," he replied quickly. "Just cheese though."

"Are you one of those health food nuts?" I asked. That was the only explanation.

He grinned impishly, "I'm not nuts but I do try to take care of myself."

"Okay, one cheese pizza coming up." I went to the table where the phone was located and pulled out the directory that was in the drawer. It only took me a few minutes to locate a pizza place in the yellow pages and call in the order for a large cheese pizza. "Anything to drink?" I asked, turning to Rafe.

"No thanks. Ice water will be fine." I nodded and let the pizza person on the other end of the line know that would be it and waited for the total. After I hung up I realized that Rafe

was still standing and very uncomfortably at that. As I had thought earlier, his borrowed clothes were probably cutting off circulation to vital organs.

"Those jeans look a little uncomfortable," I said starting across the room. "I might have something upstairs that fits better. Let me go have a look and I can let the security guys know a delivery person is coming." Thoughts of what vital organs that were being deprived of oxygen were making me feel uncomfortable myself and I needed a few minutes to regroup. I left the study and went upstairs to Bruce's room. He was in Nashville visiting Buffy, whom he had met when we traveled there. He was delivering a copy of his sword to her but he had left most of his clothes behind. It took me a few minutes to find a pair of black jeans in a drawer that I was sure would fit Rafe better than to ones he already had on and rejoined him in the study.

"Try these," I said as I handed them to him. He looked them over curiously and glanced at my questioningly. I figured he was wondering about the presence of men's pants in my house. "They belong to my adopted child, Bruce." Relief crossed his dark features and I couldn't help but think how handsome he was. "H-He isn't here now...h-he's out of town." My voice sounded husky and breathless. That sounded mature, I scolded myself. Pull yourself together, dummy; you're acting like an idiot.

Rafe was looking around. "Do you have a bathroom where I can change?"

"Oh," I said blinking at him. I had done some modeling in college so the naked form didn't bother me, even if it was a guy. I had to admit, though, that I wanted to see Rafe naked, very bad. Just then, I heard voices in the hall and wondered if the pizza was here already. "Um, why don't you go ahead and change in here. I think your dinner is here." I knew he had saved my life and that there was some kind of mutual attraction between us, but I wasn't ready to let him roam about the house too much. There were things in the house that could lead to Rafe not having a choice about what his, or my, next course of action would be. I went to the door that led to the hallway and found the delivery guy was here, box in hand. I turned to inform Rafe and found that he was already unbuttoning the fly of the jeans. Get out of here, the voice in my head screamed and I quickly stepped out of the room closed the door behind me. Not, however, before I caught a glimpse of the trail of dark hair that disappeared into the waistband of the pants.

Chapter 8: Pieces That Begin To Fall

*"I just want to feel safe in my own skin
I just want to be happy again."*

Dido

"Honestly Oh"

I paid the delivery boy then went downstairs to the kitchen and retrieved a plate and glass with ice water. Rafe ate and we discussed the events of the day that led to him being shot. He told me that he followed me home from Rachel's house because his sister, whom he had dropped off, lived right next door. That means he knows where the Chantry is, I told myself remembering where I had went after I left Rachel's.

He had went home, got some sleep and returned the next day to find a black woman walking up to the front door. He said she punched in the access code and entered the house, leaving the front door wide open. At least his story hadn't seemed to change from the pain filled ravings he'd given earlier when he was hurt.

He followed her into the house and up to the second floor where he saw her exiting one of the other rooms and going to the one where I slept. She had pulled a gun upon finding me and said coldly, "You can't have him-he's mine."

It was then that he made his presence known to her. He said that he tried to get the gun away from her. "She was really strong, Brenda," he said amazed. "It was like I was fighting a marine. The gun went off and I think she was shot but I'm not sure. There was blood on her clothes but it didn't seem to slow her down. She pushed me really hard and I flew across the room, which must have been when I broke my leg. She got the gun again and shot me before leaving without another word."

There were voices in the hall again. I looked at the clock and was astonished to find that it was almost midnight. Micky had dropped us off around ten o'clock. Rafe had been here for almost two hours! Whenever I was with Rafe time seemed to fly by. And I found that I liked that. A knock sounded on the study door. "Come in," I called, standing.

The door opened to reveal Micky and Sarah. "Everything okay?" Micky asked as they entered the study and closed the door behind them.

"Fine," I replied, gesturing them to come in and have a seat, which they did. "Rafe, you met Micky George. This is his girlfriend, Sarah Hamilton."

Rafe had stood as well. He smiled to them and they exchanged greetings. "I got a preliminary report from the team," Micky started as we all took seats, he and Sarah on the couch and Rafe and I in chairs.

"What have they found out?" I asked.

"Well, whoever it was eluded every camera. All we know is that it was a female and that she had dark hair." That startled me. There were at least twenty cameras that covered the house and grounds. Whoever this woman was she had immeasurable security knowledge.

"That goes along with Rafe's story," I said glancing at him and found that he was studying Sarah intently. My heart fluttered a little. Did he find her attractive? Stop with this nonsense, I thought. Like it matters to you who he's attracted to. He's not your personal property or anything.

"Brenda." I realized Micky was trying to get my attention.

"I'm sorry," I said, making an attempt to cover my daydreaming. "What was that? I was trying to think of who this girl could be. I can't place her."

"I was saying that I have talked to Elvira and she isn't happy about the security breach. She is sending Richard over to spend the day here while you sleep."

I felt relieved. I hadn't admitted it yet but I was frightened to stay here now, all by myself. Sure, Micky was making sure all the codes and locks were being changed but the feeling of security I had felt ever since moving into this house was gone and I didn't think the presence of a ghoul during the day could help that much. "Thank you. That makes me feel better," I lied.

"You look very familiar," Rafe was saying to Sarah. "Are you from Salem?"

"No," Sarah replied. "I moved here only a few years ago."

"That's so weird. Usually I'm really good with faces." Rafe smiled suddenly and snapped his fingers. "I know, you were in the coven with my sister," he said, quite happy with himself. Micky's eyes became venomous, like they always did when Sarah's piece of mind was in question.

Sarah looked guilty as she put her hand on Micky's thigh and said, "You're right Mr. Brown. Until two years ago I was a member of the coven and friends with Rachel and the others." She glanced at Micky before continuing. "When I became involved with Micky I felt as if it would be best if I dissolved that relationship. I didn't want them to become pawns if the wrong people found out about my actions."

Rafe studied Sarah for a moment before replying, "I find your responsibility to your friends compelling, but if I'm not mistaken they are worried about you. Wouldn't it be better to at least let them know you're alive and well? I know my sister in particular wonders what became of you."

Sarah shifted a little uncomfortably and glanced from Rafe to myself. "It's funny you should mention that. I have come to the conclusion to do just that. As a matter of fact, I was thinking of phoning Rachel. I understand their concern and I didn't want anyone to be worried. You are a good man, Mr. Brown, to question someone of my nature that way only for the good of people you've only met recently."

It was Rafe's turn to look uncomfortable. "Please, call me Rafe. I don't mean to offend. I just know if someone I cared about was missing I would want to know what happened to them." To my surprise, Rafe looked at me during this speech, making me hope that maybe he was including me in the group of those he cared about.

"Yes. That's all very well and good," Micky said standing and offering his hand to Sarah to do the same. "I believe we will take a walk around the house and see that everything is going okay, Brenda. Let me know if you find out anything else."

"Of course, Micky," I said as they left the room, leaving me alone once again with Rafe.

"He is very protective of her isn't he?" Rafe asked after the door was closed.

"Yes," I said returning my glance to his. I couldn't get over the color of his eyes. They were the clearest green I have ever seen. I knew I was being rude, staring like this, but I just couldn't help myself. Could he have feelings for me or was I hoping for too much? I knew I had to get him out of here soon or I was going to make a fool out of myself. "Listen, you look pretty tired. Why don't we get together tomorrow night and go over the rest of this." Rafe looked as if he were about to protest so I continued. "I don't think she will come back a second time and besides all the codes and locks are being changed."

"Okay," Rafe said hesitantly. "Are you sure? When will this Richard be here?"

I smiled at his concern and that he remembered Micky's comment. "He will be here before dawn. Don't worry, I'll be safe," I said, standing and Rafe followed. "Why don't you come over around seven?"

It was his turn to smile now. "Sounds fine." He looked as if he wanted to say or do more but I was sure I was just deluding myself. I wanted to see things that weren't there. He probably wanted to get out of here as fast as he could and not come back. I walked him to the door where he promised to see me the next night and he left.

Chapter 9: Getting To Know You

*"I want somebody who cares
For me passionately
With every thought and with every breath."*

*Depeche Mode
"Somebody"*

The doorbell rang at precisely seven o'clock the next evening. I went toward it and stopped to check the security monitor that was hidden by an oak door that matched the rest of the foyer. The monitor had been installed last night as an extra security measure. It was Rafe, holding a rather large basket.

"Hi," I said pleasantly as I stepped aside for him to enter. He was wearing white pants and a navy polo shirt that brought out his green eyes. Once again, thoughts of Rafe being a hunter entered my mind and I tried to bury them again. In my overactive imagination I was thinking there were stakes and all kinds of other torture devices inside the basket just waiting to be put to use. I used my heightened senses to see if I could detect any helpers that might be lurking in the shrubbery but couldn't sense anything. What I heard from the basket surprised me. Whining?

Rafe cleared his throat before he spoke. "Hello. I take it everything went okay during the day?" He was standing there with the biggest Cheshire cat grin on his face. Maybe he had a demon or something in there for all I knew.

"Y-Yes. Everything was fine." I pointed to the basket and asked, "What's in there?"

Rafe laughed. "What, in here?" he teased as he shook the basket a little and was rewarded with what sounded like a yip. His ease made me feel a little better about what was probably in there. Marginally. "Well, it's something for you, if you want it."

"For me? Why?" I was starting to get excited now and stepped aside so Rafe could enter. I couldn't believe he actually brought me a present. After I closed the door behind him I held out my hands, not wanting to try to decipher what this meant. So he'd brought a gift. No big deal, right? I'd been a wreck ever since I rose an hour ago. First I couldn't decide what to wear. After going through my entire closet, I finally chose a tan tank top sweater and a pair of matching slacks.

The next problem was food. I was lucky enough to find a health food store in the yellow pages that delivered so I phoned and ordered one of everything. I didn't know what Rafe liked or didn't like so I thought I'd play it safe.

Rafe laughed again as he opened the lid to the basket and revealed a little brown furred head that popped out, yelping. It was an Irish Wolfhound puppy. It had a shaggy brown coat and because of its breed, was almost too big to be a puppy. I jumped, automatically thinking the dog wouldn't like me. Most animals didn't like Kindred on sheer principal.

The puppy yelped again, begging to be freed from the basket. He had his forepaws on the rim of the basket and I was waiting for him to catch a whiff of me or whatever it was that alerted them to what we were. Rafe eyed me warily as he took the puppy out and put the basket on the floor. Without a word, he held the dog out to me and it yelped a third time and looked at me with a 'hold me, hold me' expression. I carefully took the puppy from Rafe; afraid it would bite me.

But to my surprise he didn't. As a matter of fact, he started licking my face while his tail wagged enthusiastically against my arm.

"Do you like him?" Rafe asked beaming.

"Yes," I laughed. I had never had an animal as a kid. Dad had always said I had to be ready to go stay with my aunt quickly when he was called out for a fire and that a dog didn't fit into that kind of hectic lifestyle. "What's his name?"

"Jorell." The name sounded familiar to me. I thought it was a fictional character from a movie or something but I didn't know for sure.

"Hi, Jorell," I said, pulling him closer to me. He was so excited. I didn't think a tail could move that fast. "Hey boy. How are you? Huh, boy, how ya doing?" I realized I probably sounded like an idiot but I didn't really care. This was the best present I had ever gotten. "Thank you, Rafe." I hid my face in the puppy's coat to mask my pleasure.

"You're welcome." The rough timber of his voice rumbled in the pit of my stomach.

"Are you hungry?" I asked, stepping back into the foyer. "I'm a little better prepared tonight."

Rafe's eyebrows raised in surprise. "Oh, really? What did you do buy a store or something?"

"Not really," I smiled, leading him further into the house and downstairs to the kitchen. I had to juggle Jorell to one arm so I could open the refrigerator door then stepped back to let Rafe have a look. "There's all different kinds of teas and other stuff in the cupboards over there," I said indicating the row of oak cabinets that lined a wall of the room. "Help yourself."

"Okay," he said closing the refrigerator door and moving to the cupboards. Rafe studied the contents for a moment as I did my new masterly duty and scratched behind Jorell's ears. "Cups?" he asked pulling out a box of green tea and taking out a bag. I showed him where they were and he made a cup of tea. After he was through, I led the way into the TV/REC room across the hall.

"Have a seat," I said sitting in one of the overstuffed chairs. The room was one of my favorites in the house because it wasn't as formal as the living and sitting rooms on the main floor. When Elvira lived here the house ghouls had used the room and so it was more contemporary than the rest of the house. Rafe sat as well and as he sipped the hot beverage we talked easily for a few minutes. Niceties mostly. I think both of us were unbearably nervous and didn't know how to really break the ice.

I knew I couldn't pretend that this was a date or anything. Rafe was here for only one reason and I knew that. "So what else can you tell me about the woman?" I asked, getting comfortable. Jorell jumped down from my lap and went to Rafe, who promptly bent over and scratched behind his ears.

"Well, she was about 5'4", 5'5"," he began. "She had brown hair, about shoulder length, and it was straight. She was thin and her eyes were brown, too. She also had a tattoo of some kind on her shoulder." Rafe's face showed confusion. "I've never seen anything like it before. It wasn't tribal but it looked like a series of lines."

That peeked my interest. I knew some Kindred marked their ghouls with glyphs so they could be easily identified by other vampires. Glyphs were normally broken down into three sections. One told the city of origin of the Kindred, another the clan and the last was a personal design belonging solely to that vampire.

"Could you draw it?" I asked leaning forward.

Rafe thought a moment then shrugged. "I could try. It was kind of weird but if you think it will help." I had already stood and was looking around the room for paper and a pen. Rafe took them and went to a long table in the room that the ghouls had used as a dinner

table and leaned over it. What he ended up drawing meant nothing to me even if it was correct.

"I'm not sure that's right," Rafe said, studying the paper. "I'd know it if I saw it again, though."

"Good enough," I conceded. "How was she dressed?"

"Very well," he said turning and walking a few steps away. "You know, dress pants and jacket. Her makeup was perfect. She looked like a secretary or something. She even had a string of pearls on."

That was a clincher for me. I had a bad feeling from the beginning that this woman was somehow connected to Michael. The more Rafe told me about her the more I believed my worries to be true. What would Michael be doing here? Obviously it didn't have anything to do with me or he would have contacted me, wouldn't he? It hurt to think that he could be so near and that it was so easy for him to disregard me like he was, especially after the past couple of years had been hard for me to put the past where it belonged. In the past.

"She was driving a Nissan," Rafe was saying. He had his back to me so he had no idea I was missing any of his narrative. "It was fairly new and had a Massachusetts plate."

I don't know why, but I lost it then. Thoughts of Michael's new ghoul trying to kill me because she thought I was in the way were too much to think about. Blood tears welled up in my eyes and spilled down my cheeks before I had a chance to stop them. I turned from Rafe quickly, not wanting him to be alarmed if he saw blood on my face. I was horrified to be this pathetic and put my hands over my eyes, trying to regain control. I felt weak, not at all like the person who had seen so much death in the past three years and had took it all in stride. Get a hold of yourself, I demanded. Don't be a baby. Maybe it isn't Michael, I prayed silently.

A sob must have escaped the back of my throat, giving me away, because I felt Rafe approach and pull me gently into his arms. "Shh," he cooed. "Everything will be okay, Brenda. I promise. Don't cry."

How can you be so sure? I wanted to ask. You have no idea what's going on here. Hell, I didn't even know. But I loved the thought of him caring and it raised my spirits. If things were different nothing would have stopped me from attempting a relationship with Rafe, but I knew he couldn't be the least bit interested.

The tears stopped as well as my sobs and Rafe still held me, saying over and over again how everything would be all right.

"You're a good man," I sniffed when I was able. My face was still buried in my hands and I knew there was blood all over them and my face. Thoughts of how I was going to escape without Rafe seeing me this way were racing through my mind.

"Thank you." I felt him pull back and look down at me. "Are you okay?"

I nodded and replied, "Could you turn around, please?" The way we were standing left no way for me to get out of the room without Rafe seeing the blood and I knew I had to clean up. I just wasn't ready for him to see any of the proof that I was a vampire yet. I guess it was the part of me that wanted to be with him. I couldn't stand another rejection.

"Are you sure you're okay?" he asked again.

I nodded, "I need to wash my face." His arms fell and I looked through my fingers to see as I dashed out the room and upstairs. As I had suspected, there was blood on my sweater and when I arrived in my bedroom I peeled it off and tried to get the blood out before throwing it into the hamper in the bathroom. I quickly washed my hands and face then reapplied makeup. I brushed my hair and pulled on a bulky sweater before heading back down to the basement.

Rafe was where I had left him. He had apparently been back to the kitchen while I was upstairs because there was a plate with organic crackers and cheese on it on the table. Rafe was looking at the books on the shelves.

"I'm sorry," I said from the doorway. He turned and I entered the room, my arms crossed protectively in front of me. "I'm usually not such a baby but –"

"Don't be silly," Rafe interrupted as he came to me and held my upper arms. "Jesus, Brenda. Your life was in danger yesterday. I would think something was wrong with you if you weren't upset." His eyes were boring into mine, making me wish again he would kiss me. "Do you feel better now?"

"Yes, thank you," I said smiling weakly. I pulled away from him and unfortunately he let me go. I walked to a table and chair set that was in the center of the room. "Tell me about yourself, Rafe. You know so much about me, but all I know is that you're Sam's brother." I desperately needed to feel a connection with him at this point. He knew things about me that not many mortals did especially anyone close to me. I hadn't even told my dad and he was the only family I had left with the exception of Antonio and Christina.

"There's not much to tell." Rafe described to me the details of his parents' death when he was twelve and Samantha was five. They died in a car accident and after the two of them went to live with Alec. After graduation Rafe and his cousin Brian went to NYU where they met Howie Dorough and AJ McLean. The four of them became good friends and they were still in contact. Rafe went to work for Doubleday and as he explained it, "I was fired a few weeks ago. Finding another job in my field was impossible so I decided it was best to move back to Salem." Thanks to Rachel, I already knew the circumstances that led to his dismissal and I figured it was a touchy subject he didn't want to talk about. I did wonder to myself, however, what attracted him to other men. What did he like better, men or women?

"Well I must say that I am glad you did or I might not be here right now," I said with a smile. "I owe you."

"You owe me nothing." His tone was very serious as he came to stand in front of me again. My hair hung loose around my shoulders and he took a few tendrils gently in his fingers and played with the strands like a lover caressing skin. "Let's do something fun," he suggested with a wicked grin. "Why don't we watch a movie or something?"

"I'm afraid I don't have any movies." I felt really uncomfortable. It was one thing to want him this close and another entirely to actually have him inches from me. It was really hard to think and I found myself wondering for the millionth time how his lips would feel pressed to mine. Shaking my head and needing a reason to speak I squeaked out, "T-There's a video store down the street. Do you want to go rent something?"

Rafe smiled and I knew that if he asked me for anything right now I would do whatever I had to. "Sounds good. Let's go." We decided the rental place was close enough to walk and I found myself really enjoying Rafe's company. We ended up with a comedy I hadn't even heard about and when we returned to the house I led Rafe back to the TV/REC room downstairs because it was the only one with a TV and VCR.

We started the movie and made a good effort to watch it. Soon, however, we were talking more about ourselves. Our likes and dislikes, what college had been like. Rafe was surprised to learn that I had attended UNLV. It was something I had wanted left out of the small biography that was printed in my book. I didn't want to many references to my age being made because no matter when someone read the book, I would look the same as when it had been first published. Those were references I didn't need in my line of living. I looked at the clock for the first time that night and was surprised to find out that it was 4:00 AM.

When Rafe started talking about working for his uncle I knew it was a subject that bothered him. "I know it's just busy work," he said. "Uncle Alec is only making it look like he needs me but I know he doesn't. I'm going to have to find something else soon. He can't afford to keep me on for long if I'm not doing much." From what Rafe had already told me I knew he was a proud man and in his mind what his uncle was doing was a form of charity. That was something he wasn't willing to take.

"What is your degree in?" I asked with interest. An idea was starting to form in my head but I wasn't willing to put it into words yet.

"I have a BA in Literature with a specialization in poetry. Why?" He was studying me closely. It was a look I was fast recognizing as his curious face.

Chapter 10: Second Drink

*"I'd like to watch you sleep at night
to hear you breathe by my side"*

Dido

"All I Want"

"Do you have any experience in business?" I didn't know where this could possibly be leading. Don't fool yourself, I retorted in my head. You know exactly where you're going with this.

"I don't know a lot," he replied with a shrug. "I've always been a quick learner, though, and I remember everything. It's kind of annoying sometimes." I didn't see how anything about him could ever be annoying but I didn't say anything.

"All my investments are tied up in Nevada right now," I began hesitantly. "I would like to move everything to the East Coast; you know New York or Boston. I've been having inclinations lately that the people who are taking care of things for me out there are doing some skimming and I want the transfer made as soon as possible. I need someone to handle the transfers, you know, the legal end. If you're a quick study then maybe you're what I'm looking for. Would you be interested in helping me out?" I stopped there. I knew that if he wanted the job he would let me know. I wasn't sure how stupid this suggestion was but I knew I wanted to keep him close to me in any way I could. I glanced at the clock again and saw that it was now almost five o'clock. Richard would be here soon.

"What exactly would that entail?" he asked, with a skeptical look.

"Well, you would have to take care of things during the day that I couldn't," I replied simply. "Banking matters and the like. My name will have some clout in the area and that will give you some advantages in getting things done." I knew this sounded really close to the explanation I gave him about ghouls a few nights ago and to be honest the thought was appealing to me. Would he be that interested?

Rafe studied me for a moment then stood and went to the bookshelves where he appeared to be intently checking out the contents. I knew he was thinking. This was a big decision for him and I left him to his thoughts. Deciding to take a job in a new field was one thing but committing to work for a vampire had to be a point that hung up any new recruit. After a few minutes, I followed him and placed a hand on his shoulder before asking, "Are you okay?"

He turned and peered at me. "Do you know how beautiful your eyes are?" Rafe asked out of the blue. I bowed my head, the desire to blush intense. Rafe put his forefinger under my chin and lifted my face again. "Do ghouls go everywhere with their masters?"

I smiled slightly, content in the knowledge that he was thinking ahead of me. "Not everywhere. There are places that a ghoul must be accompanied by a Kindred or they can't be there, but that's only in high security areas."

"And can they retain relationships with their family and friends?"

"Until such time as the normal aging process or lack thereof becomes apparent. But then I'm sure makeup and the like can be used." I was trying to sound nonchalant as I answered him. Acting like a giddy schoolgirl would only make me look the fool.

Without warning, Rafe wrapped his arms around me and pulled me to him. Even though my heart no longer beat I felt a flutter in my chest as his head dropped and he kissed me. His lips were as soft as I suspected they would be and I quickly returned the kiss. His tongue pushed its way past my lips and into my mouth, stroking its way deeper.

My hands found their way up to his shoulders and then into the hair at the nape of his neck as I pulled myself closer to him. I couldn't help myself. I had no idea where this could lead but I felt sheltered in his arms and that was a feeling I hadn't had in a long time. If I wasn't careful, I'd lose myself in the green eyes of his.

I felt his warm hands glide up and down my back and it felt so amazingly good. His heart was beating fast under my breast and I pressed closer, wanting to take the sensation in forever.

I'm not sure how long the kiss lasted or who pulled away first but when I looked into Rafe's eyes I saw desire and longing and that made me happier than I had been in two long years. "Do you want to become my ghoul?" I asked breathlessly. "I know it's a huge choice and I want you to know it's your decision."

"Why do you want a ghoul, Brenda?" he asked. His arms were around my waist again and our bodies were still pressed together. I knew I couldn't and didn't want to lie to him.

"I don't want to be alone anymore," I said studying his chin. The admission was hard and I found I couldn't meet his eyes.

"I don't want you to be alone either." He dropped his head again and kissed my forehead. Our lips met again and when we parted I pulled Rafe to the table and chairs and asked him to sit. After a slight hesitation he did and I touched his cheek tentatively as I knelt in front of him. Desire had been stirred up in both of us so I didn't touch him in any way. We both needed our heads for what lay ahead.

"I know I've told you a little about what being a ghoul entails but do you have any questions?" Rafe stared at me blankly as if he didn't know where to begin. "You will have to drink my blood," I said and watched Rafe to gauge his reaction. To his credit he didn't flinch and that was a good start.

"How often?" he asked.

I found myself wanting to run a finger across his bottom lip. The small taste he'd given wasn't enough by a long shot but I had to concentrate on the matter at hand. "You will need to feed from me at least once a month. Sometimes more if you need to."

"Why would I need to?"

"Remember when I told you that ghouls have special abilities?" After Rafe nodded I continued, "There are certain things ghouls can do that require them to use the vampire blood in them to do it. When that happens they need to replenish the supply within themselves."

"Would I drink only your blood?"

I blinked at the question. Why would he want to know that? "Yes. Why do you ask?"

Rafe appeared relieved and his smile returned. "Just wondering, that's all. I'm sure everything will work out. What do I have to do?"

His willingness put me at ease. I stood and kissed his lips lightly. "I'll open my wrist and you can drink from there. Is that okay?"

Rafe nodded and I turned my head to bite my wrist with my lowered fangs. I retracted them as I turned back to Rafe and held my arm out to him.

He was hesitant at first but he took my wrist to his mouth and was soon drinking deeply. I allowed him to take about a pint of my vitae before I tried to pull my hand away. He didn't let go and I had to forcibly drag my arm from his grasp as ripples of pleasure racked through me. I licked the wound closed.

I could tell Rafe's awareness had changed. His eyes were almost electric and the lines in his forehead were practically nonexistent. He stood and immediately lifted me into his arms then claimed my lips in a soul-shattering kiss. I knew dawn was fast approaching and I would

have to sleep soon and the thought angered me. I wanted to spend more time with Rafe. I felt robbed.

"Stay with me?" I asked when our lips parted and Rafe smiled down at me as he headed for the stairs. When we reached to main floor I saw Richard was just coming in the front door. "Mr. Brown will be staying the day," I said as Rafe continued to the next flight of stairs.

"Very good, Miss Thompson," I heard Richard say as he closed the door again and engaged the security system.

There was barely enough time for me to change into a lacy peignoir and tell Rafe about the security codes so he could move around the house during the day. He found a pair of pajama bottoms in Bruce's room and I thought I would start to salivate he looked so good. I pulled him into bed next to me and as the sun rose and my eyes closed, I heard Rafe murmur, "You'll never be alone again."

But I was alone the next evening. I was groggy and slow to rise until the memories of the previous evening came flooding back to me. I sat bolt up right in the bed and was relieved to find Rafe sitting in a chair across the room. His elbows rested on the arms of the chair and his fingers were steepled in front of his face. He was watching me.

"G-Good morning...good evening. Hi," I stammered stupidly.

"Good evening, Brenda." Oh, of course he would be a perfect example of an all-together man while I stumbled around like a kid being caught with their hand in the cookie jar.

I rose from the bed and went to sit on my heels between his legs with my hands on his thighs. "Did you sleep well?" I asked.

"Fine, and you?" He dropped his hands so that they hung off the ends of the arms of the chair, inches from my own.

"Just fine," I replied before I pulled my bottom lip in my mouth to chew on it. He was still dressed in the pajama bottoms and his chest was as appealing as it had been when I saw it the other night at the doctor's house. Our eyes met and I thought I felt something electric pass between us. He straightened his fingers so they brushed against my hands as they lay on his thighs.

Not able to help myself, I rose on my knees and leaned forward to kiss him. His mouth tasted minty, almost as if he had brushed his teeth just before I awoke in an effort to please me. It did, very much.

When his tongue entered my mouth shivers ran down my spine. Rafe's hands had moved to my upper arms, pulling me closer. Mine had left his thighs and were on his chest, caressing the muscles as I worked them up to his neck to lock them behind it. Our tongues played together in a wet dance that left his heart racing in his chest.

When Rafe rose from the chair he brought me with him and it didn't take long for him to maneuver us to the bed. Once there, he pulled the peignoir over my head, being careful not to damage the expensive lace then tossed it to the floor. As he reclaimed my lips and buried his hands in my long dark hair, I found the tie to the waistband of the pajama bottoms and pulled it loose.

I backed away from him and knelt on the bed as Rafe pushed the bottoms over his hips and down his long legs. His body was lean and hard and I found myself edgy with the anticipation of discovering every inch of it. I watched him intently as he joined me on the bed and when he was close enough I took his head in my hands and kissed him with every ounce of feeling I had and he returned the same passion.

We melted down to the bed and each other's arms and just kissed for what seemed like an eternity, getting to know the other's mouth and its every recess with a languor that comes only to those with the control to try.

Rafe rolled over on top of me and began to kiss his way around my body, learning about it the same way he had my mouth. I think I actually had goosebumps. When he wasn't kissing some part of me he was caressing another. When I tried to do the same to him, he took my hands and kissed each before laying them on the bed beside me. "There will be time, later," he breathed huskily and I smiled up at him, knowing that indeed my turn would come.

When I thought I couldn't take anymore Rafe parted my thighs and I cried out when he entered me. This was this first time I had been with a man since before my embrace and it was like I was a virgin again. The sensations were absolutely mind-blowing, beyond any description. Rafe set the rhythm and I quickly matched it. I was amazed that I could feel this in tune with anyone but Michael. He was an experienced lover with whom I thought I would find no equal. Rafe was quickly proving me wrong, however.

Rafe's skin glistened with sweat and my hands slid across his shoulders and to his neck, a place that was fast becoming my favorite part of him. I lifted my head, careful to not lose the rhythm our bodies created, and nibbled near his jugular. He shivered and I felt a slight pull within me to lower my fangs and taste him, just a little. The urge was quickly pushed aside as Rafe changed his pace and new sensations racked my body. I lowered my head to the bed again and peered up at Rafe through eyes that were barely opened. His were smoky and had a glazed effect that I found thrilling. I was completely lost in him.

I could tell Rafe was using every ounce of control he could muster to make sure we were both experiencing everything possible but I really couldn't take much more. I moaned in ecstasy, as Rafe increased his motions, knowing the time I had been waiting for was close. I reached my release just after Rafe began to shudder in his and after we lay spent in each other's arms. For the first time in a long while, I knew true happiness.

"You're incredible," he said thickly as he rolled to one side and brought me to lie next to him. His body was red with passion and I nearly allowed myself to caress him in an effort to do it all over again. Nearly.

"Thank you," I said smoothing the palm of my hand over his slick skin. I kissed his chest, tasting the saltiness that lingered there.

"For what?" He had to tip his head oddly to look at me.

"For being here."

Chapter 11: The Sabbat

*"You must think that something
is happening with you, that life
has not forgotten you, that it
holds you in it's hand;
it will not let you fall..."*

*Ranier Maria Rilke
"Letters to a Young Poet"*

The phone rang a short time later and I reached over Rafe to grab the cordless unit from the table on his side of the bed. "Hello," I said euphorically. Rafe held me across his chest by wrapping his arms around me.

"Brenda?" It was Micky calling from the Chantry and wanting to know if the security system was running properly. I looked at the bedside clock and was surprised to see that it was almost nine o'clock. Three hours had past since sundown. I told him everything seemed fine then I asked to speak with Elvira. I wanted to know if I needed to present Rafe to her right away or not. It took a few minutes for her to pick up the line but when she did she told me to wait to bring Rafe by the Chantry until the blood bond was complete.

"I've heard some interesting rumors, childe," she said after a short gap in conversation.

"Oh, my Prince? What's that?" I hoped that I hadn't done anything to displease her.

"It seems as if we have a Sabbat pack in the area," she replied quietly. A Sabbat pack was bad news. Really bad news. As part of the Camarilla, clans like the Tremere strived to live parallel with mortals and in many ways helped to improve their lives. That is what the Masquerade was all about. Business interests held by many Camarilla Kindred led to jobs not to mention the research and development that were helping to find cures for cancer and AIDS. The Sabbat on the other hand thought of mortals as cattle and that they should be treated as such.

I didn't have much knowledge about them but I knew enough to steer clear. I glanced at Rafe and worried about the safety of those mortals who I had come to care for in the past two years. What would happen to them in a war for control of the city?

I asked Elvira for more details on what she had heard and she informed me that they were rumors for now but she thought I would want to know. Elvira also said she would let me know if she heard anything else. I thanked her and hung up after we said our good byes.

I thought of Rafe and the members of the coven again and worry filled in my mind. Rafe must have picked up on my thoughts and asked, "Everything alright? Who was on the phone?"

Without saying anything I rose to my knees and straddled Rafe's thighs. His hands came up immediately to cup my hips as I returned the phone to its cradle. I opened the drawer of the bedside table and pulled out the Glock I kept there. "Do you know how to use one of these?" I asked holding it in front of me.

He looked confused to say the least. Rafe cleared his throat before answering, "Yes. Why?"

I released the clip and pulled it from the weapon then popped the round that was already chambered. I took the clip and gun in one hand and held the extra round between my thumb and forefinger. "This is a phosphorous round, otherwise known as dragons' breath." Rafe looked truly impressed. "It is the only form of ammunition a person can use to do actual damage to a Kindred. Regular rounds will hurt us, but we can heal those wounds easily

enough, just as you can because you are a ghoulish now." Rafe nodded in understanding as I reloaded the gun and handed it to him. He took it and held the weapon in front of him, realizing I think for the first time the depth of what his existence now meant.

"I want you to be prepared," I continued as Rafe laid the gun on the table. "There is a bad element in the city and I want you to be able to take care of yourself. Will you take the third drink?"

"Brenda, what's going on? If you think there's danger of some kind, of course I will. I want to be able to protect you." He had placed his hands back on my hips and he held them there gently.

"There is a group of Kindred called the Sabbat. They usually run in packs and tend to do nothing but cause trouble. Elvira has heard rumors that they're here."

"Who's Elvira?" he asked.

"She is the Prince of the city. We Kindred have what's called a conclave that's like the House of Representatives or Senate. Every clan with numbers in a city sends a representative called a Primogen to the conclave and they make decisions about Kindred politics. The Prince has overall say on anything."

"I see," Rafe responded. "Do you work for her or something?"

"In a way," I smiled. "She is Tremere as well and it was by her request that I moved here."

He nodded and reached up to caress my cheek, "Of course, I'll take the next drink. Bring it on." He chuckled a little as he spoke.

His complete trust really helped to calm my nerves. I leaned down and kissed Rafe passionately and his hands roamed up my back again. I remembered the trouble I had getting him to release my arm during the feeding the previous night and had a wicked idea on how to avoid the problem this time. The idea was to distract Rafe with other pleasures to take his mind off the feeding. As Kindred, when I feed from humans I had to be aware that I didn't take too much blood and kill them. Contrary to some works of fiction, the feeding process was a pleasurable act for both parties involved and it was easy to get lost in it. When a ghoulish fed it had the same effect and Rafe could be stronger than I could so I had to be cunning.

I allowed my hands and body to rub suggestively against his as the kiss deepened and was pleased when I felt him respond. I didn't give him a chance to question my motives as I caressed his most intimate parts. When he was ready I pulled away long enough to turn my head and pierce my wrist. Rafe was smiling dreamily when I turned back and as he took my wrist to his mouth I mounted him, giving him the full example of what being a ghoulish had to offer. After he fed I didn't have a problem pulling my arm away to lick the small puncture marks closed.

One thing led to another and I soon found myself involved in another long and intense love session. When we rose from the bed it was near midnight. I was incredibly impressed with his stamina and couldn't wait to see if it worked as well out of the bedroom as it did within. We showered together, using every opportunity we could to be close to each other. "Will you move in?" I asked as the water sprayed down on us.

Rafe was just putting a bottle of conditioner back on the ledge and almost dropped it. "Are you sure?" he asked over his shoulder as he righted the bottle and turned back to me, then applied the conditioner to his head. I heard an underlying tone of excitement at my suggestion but Rafe was trying to hold it back. I understood that he was only trying to protect his feelings, this was after all still a new relationship and I was going to do all I could to reassure him.

"Yes," I nodded slipping my arms around his waist. "Do you want to?"

"Of course," he said grinning down at me before dropping a kiss on my waiting lips.

"Well it's settled then." We quickly finished bathing and left the shower to dress. Rafe called Samantha as I applied makeup and I used Auspex to listen in on the conversation. Samantha was concerned because Rafe hadn't returned home the previous night. He assured her he was fine and that he was with me. She was surprised at first but didn't question him too much. He informed her that he was going to move in with me and that we would be by soon to pick up his stuff.

"Are you sure about this, Rafe?" she asked. "Don't get me wrong, I love Brenda, but you just met her."

He glanced over his shoulder at me before moving across the room. He mumbled something about Iowa into the phone but I didn't understand what it meant.

We left the house about a half an hour later after letting Jorell out to do his duty. We took his car, a practical Ford Contour, because it afforded much more space than my two seater BMW Roadster did. When we arrived at Samantha's house we found that her boyfriend Simon was there as well. The two men went upstairs to retrieve Rafe's things and left Samantha and I alone.

"How've you been, Brenda?" she asked sounding as if she were very uncomfortable.

"Fine, Sam." I wasn't feeling real at ease myself. "Listen, I know this sounds pretty off the wall but I want you to know that I really have come to care for your brother and I want to assure you that I won't hurt him." Her relief was apparent and she took my hand and gave it a squeeze.

My cell phone rang and I excused myself from Samantha to move to the other side of the room. It was Micky calling to inform me of a conclave meeting later at the Chantry. "Elvira would like you to stop by before then," he said.

"Okay. We just need to drop a few things off at the house and then we'll be there." I told him to inform Elvira that the blood bond was complete and that I would be bringing Rafe with me. He was a little surprised. He didn't know I wanted a ghoulish much less the fact that I had one bonded already. Half way through the conversation I found that Samantha had left the room, giving me some privacy. I said my good byes and turned off the cell phone before returning it to the pocket of my jacket. Rafe and Simon came down then, arms full of boxes and suitcases and took them out to the car.

When the car was loaded, Rafe told his sister he would talk to her soon and he gave her the phone number to the house. We drove back to the mansion in comfortable silence and I helped Rafe bring his suitcases in and up to the bedroom that we would now share.

Chapter 12: Presentations and Revelations

"You're all enlisted in the armies of the night"

Meatloaf

"Everything Louder Than Everything Else"

We switched to my car when we went to the Chantry because the guards knew it. On the way over, I told Rafe more about Kindred society and that as a ghoul he had to show respect to all vampires of the city. He seemed to accept what I told him and I was sure he would be fine.

We were led into the dinging room where Elvira, Micky and Sarah were talking to a gentleman I didn't know. They were looking over laminated maps on the large table and using dry erase markers to write on them. As I got closer, I saw that some of the maps were rather old and that still others appeared to depict underground tunnels.

"My Prince," I stated when Elvira looked up. "May I present to you Rafael Brown." Elvira's gaze shifted to Rafe and he bowed slightly at the waist in her direction. She smiled slightly and held out her hand to him. Rafe stepped forward and took her hand gently then placed a feathery kiss on the top, just as I had told him to. She looked please as Rafe straightened and returned to my side.

"Welcome, Rafael," she purred before returning her attention to me. "Unfortunately, there is no other news of the Sabbat, childe. I would however, like to you take a look about town. I don't think they would show themselves in any known Kindred hangouts, we would be alerted to that. Would you check out some of the other...night spots?"

"Of course, my Prince. Any place in particular?"

"No, use your own judgement. Just make sure to stay in contact."

"As you wish," I replied already doing a mental run down of possible locations to begin the hunt. Jesters sounded like as good a place as any. Elvira reminded me of the meeting later and I promised we would be back in time. Rafe and I were back in the Roadster within ten minutes and on our way to Micky's club.

It was late when we got there, almost two, and they were getting ready to close soon. I saw Ethan, Micky's ghoul, and started in his direction. I asked him if he had seen any new faces around that didn't belong in here. Micky had always made it quite clear that Jesters wasn't a Kindred local. Clan Tremere used it sometimes as a meeting place but not very often. After thinking for a few moments he said, "Yeah. Come to think of it, there was a guy and girl in here tonight. I didn't talk to them but they definitely weren't human."

"What were they?" I asked.

"Ghouls as far as I could tell. Jenny waited on them." He indicated a waitress that was busy putting empty glasses and bottles on a nearly full tray. I thanked him for his help and Rafe and I approached the girl. Jenny gave us a description of the pair and from what she said about the female, it sounded like the person who broke into my house and tried to kill me. The guy could have been anyone; the waitress said he had short brown hair and glasses. Jenny also told us that she overheard the guy say to the woman that she should be careful because she could get herself into trouble. I asked her if either of them had any tattoos and she said she remembered something on the guys neck but she couldn't remember exactly what it was. I pulled a pen from my pocket and quickly sketched what Rafe had drawn on a napkin.

"That's close I think," she said taking the pen from me and making a few adjustments.

"That's it, Brenda," Rafe confirmed. "I told you I would know it when I saw it."

Content with the information we had gathered, I thanked the girl and we left. "Where to now, boss lady?" Rafe asked from behind the wheel.

"Do you know where David's Bar is?" There was still time before the meeting and the bar was a mortal establishment that stayed open after hours for customers of my persuasion.

"Sure. That's um, kind of seedy isn't it?"

"Yes, but I want to see who's lurking about." It took us about fifteen minutes to get there. Right away I saw there was a really nice GTO parked in the lot. It was yellow and looked as if it had been restored to perfection. I also saw a group of four Harley's parked close to the building. These vehicles peaked my interest. They were way too nice for this neighborhood. I asked Rafe to park across the street and I got out saying that I'd be right back. As I started to walk away I noticed that Rafe had pulled the gun I gave him earlier in the evening and rested it on his thigh.

I walked across the street and decided to check out the GTO first. The interior was impeccable. Black leather with lots of detail and dials galore. There was a cigar wrapper on the front seat and if memory served me correct it was from a four hundred-dollar Havana cigar that immediately reminded me of Michael. He loved Havana's and always had them on hand. In the back seat there was an empty Perrier bottle and a crumpled Camel pack. The plates were from Maryland but other than that I learned nothing else.

I heard a door shut behind me and I glanced over my shoulder to see four Brujah looking guys leaving the bar. I checked them out quickly and saw that the first one appeared Kindred while at least two of the others were ghouls. Time to split, I thought to myself as I bee lined for the street, hoping they wouldn't see me.

Luck wasn't on my side however. I only got a few feet before the first catcalls started. "Hey, baby. Where ya goin'."

"Wait up, sugar. Want to party?" I continued without response and hurried to the car where I saw Rafe was about to get out and do some damage. I rounded to the passenger side but just before I got in I saw three more gentlemen exit the bar and they were all Kindred. Could they be our Sabbath buddies?

The first group gave up on getting my attention and went to the motorcycles. Without incident they fired them up and pulled out. I got in the car and Rafe reached for the key in the ignition. As the engine roared to life I said, "Wait. I want to watch those guys that just came out." Rafe's hand dropped to the shifter, ready to peel out if we had to.

The second group was still just outside the door, under a tattered awning. I thought they were an odd group because one was dressed in a beautifully tailored suit and smoking a cigar, once again reminding me of Michael. Another wore a tee shirt and jeans while the other looked pretty shaggy to say the least. They appeared to be talking so I quickly used my Auspex to try to hear and was rewarded to hear part of the conversation.

"...pose a problem or they could aide us," the one in the suit said.

"They could be hard to control as well. There are better ways," inputed the guy in jeans.

The shaggy one replied dryly, "Yeah, but it's not nearly as fun." Mr. GQ glanced across the street in our direction and I leaned closer to Rafe and pretended to be necking with him and he followed suit. I heard one of them laugh as he said; "I believe I have some information for the Ghost. Let's get back." For some reason there was a nagging voice in the back of my head that was telling me they were talking about Michael but I didn't understand why. He wouldn't be involved with them, would he?

The trio went to the GTO where Mr. GQ got behind the wheel and the guy in jeans got in the back. The shaggy one took shotgun. The GTO started and they drove away.

"Shit," I said pulling back and reaching for my cell phone. I knew the conclave meeting had probably started already but I was sure Elvira would want to know what I had found out.

"Brenda, what's wrong?" Rafe's hand was tightening on the shifter in tension.

"See that GTO?" He nodded as I dialed. "They're Kindred and they're not from around here. That means they could be the Sabbat group we've been hearing about. Lets head back to the Chantry."

"Great," he said putting the car in gear and taking off.

It took a while to get the Prince on the phone but she was glad that I called in. I told her I was going to check out a few contacts and see if anything panned out. "Don't worry about making the meeting," she said. "Continue with your investigation." She repeated to keep her informed and I hung up a few minutes later. As I was giving Elvira a run down of the evening's happenings, I had thought of an old friend. Nicaragua was a Malkavian that I meet not long after I moved to Salem. She didn't live here all the time but her sire did. Malkavians aren't known be to the sanest individuals, in fact when a person is embraced into the clan they take on any one of the classic mental illnesses found in any psychotic ward. That makes it hard to interact with them sometimes but there is something about them that makes me think they have a greater understanding of things.

I decided to call Murray, Nicaragua's sire, to see if she was in town and had anything interesting information. She was in Boston so I asked Murray instead.

Not to my surprise Murray knew that the Sabbat were in the area. In fact, he went so far as to tell me that there were at least five Kindred members to the group and that only three were in town now. The others would be back soon.

Murray also told me they were planning something, which I already had a clue of otherwise they wouldn't even be around. He made mention of empty mirrors which meant absolutely nothing to me, unless it was a reference to my adopted childe, Lord Bruce Blackwell and the fact that he didn't have a reflection.

Bruce is Lasombra, a clan that isn't normally connected with the Camarilla. In fact, they are the leaders of the Sabbat and masters of manipulating shadows. Bruce had been embraced in the tenth century when he was a knight of the realm in England and a vast landowner who fought during the holy wars. He was buried in a torporus state that left him in a deep sleep. Five hundred years later, when the descendants of his family came to the New World, they had him unearthed and brought along not knowing what it was they were bringing.

My friend Rachel Black is the priestess of the Black Rose Coven and one of Bruce's descendants. Until he was once again brought out of the ground two years ago, she was responsible for performing a ritual once a month that gave him enough blood to survive. Rachel had no idea there was a vampire buried in her back yard or that her family had kept alive him for hundreds of years. She only knew that the ritual must be performed and she did it. It was when I was asked to help with the ritual and my blood was added to the cup that Bruce was finally awakened. He had to dig his way out; much like Lestat had to in Anne Rice's novel, *The Vampire Lestat*.

Elvira was hesitant to let one of Bruce's clan to stay alive in her city, but by my word to keep an eye on him and Bruce's own actions, he soon proved himself loyal. The reason I thought of Bruce is because he doesn't have a reflection. It is a trait of that clan much like madness is for the Malkavians.

I gave Murray my cell phone number and asked him to call me if he found out anything else and he agreed. "Let's go home, Rafe," I said as I pocketed the phone and turned my attention to him. He smiled over at me and took my hand, squeezing it gently.

On the way home I noticed that we were being followed by the biggest piece of shit van I had ever seen. Rafe noticed it too and tried a few things to loose the van. After a while he was successful and we continued home. I kept an eye on the van and got a good look at the passengers. The driver was a guy I hadn't seen before and a young girl was in the passenger's seat. She was striking, with shoulder length brown hair and penetrating eyes. She had a face I knew I would never forget.

Rafe and I went home and spent the rest of the night getting to know each other better.

I was alone the next night. Rafe wasn't in our suite but Jorell was. I picked him up and together we searched the main floor then the basement of the house, but Rafe was nowhere to be found. I was starting to get worried and looked down at Jorell. "Where's Rafe?" I asked and he began to wag his tail fiercely so I put him down; thinking the puppy knew where Rafe had gone. Jorell led me to the third floor where I hadn't thought to look and we found Rafe in the room we had set aside for his study. Jorell went to Rafe's side and barked happily when Rafe rewarded him with a scratch behind the ears.

Rafe had set up his computer on a dresser in the room that he had turned into a makeshift desk and I stood there a moment to look at him, drinking in the sight. He was wearing sweatpants and a white tee shirt that emphasized the muscle contours of his back. He needs new furniture if he is going to use this for an office, I thought to myself as I glanced about the room for possible ideas.

"Hey," he said, noticing me for the first time as he stood to came over to kiss my cheek. "I lost track of time. I didn't realize it was dark."

"Hi," I replied. "I didn't know where you were. Jorell had to show me."

"I'm sorry," he said sincerely, kissing my lips this time.

"I have some catalogs," I began when he lifted his head, "if you want to look through them for a desk and things. That dresser can't be very comfortable."

Rafe looked a little edgy about the subject and I knew it was because he didn't like the idea of using my money, which I thought was ridiculous. He was working for me, technically, and that meant he was earning a salary that could be used for whatever he wanted, including furniture. "Sure," he said, hesitantly. We talked a little about what would work best in the room. What color for the walls and the wood types for the new furniture. I didn't say anything about money yet. That would be a subject to talk about later.

Rafe also told me about the calls he had made that day to New York. He knew an investment broker there and had made arrangements with him to help in the transfer of my stocks and other monies to the East Coast.

"Great," I said, pleased with his competence. I noticed a necklace around his neck that was tucked into the shirt. "What's this?" I asked pulling out an amulet with what looked like Nordic Rune markings on it. It was made from amber and was the size of a silver dollar. I thought it was beautiful.

"Oh, that." Rafe looked down at my hand to where I held it. "A friend from New York gave it to me. It's for protection. Jeffrey said the transfers will take about a week to complete."

"That's fine. Um, where's your gun?" I hadn't seen the firearm I'd given him the night before anywhere in the room.

"Downstairs in the bedroom, why?" he asked, confusion apparent.

"Don't ever go anywhere without your gun, Rafe." Concern was very evident in my voice. "You never know what could happen and you must always be prepared to protect

yourself." Rafe had to grasp the importance of what it meant to be prepared at all times. Michael had taught me that early on.

"Brenda, is there something I should know?" Concern was also apparent in his voice and I realized for the first time how little he understood my existence.

I touched his cheek gently in an effort to convey that I wasn't angry. "Rafe, I have acquired a few enemies in my time and they would go to great lengths to hurt me, especially if they knew about you." I was specifically thinking of the members of Clan Toreador in Salem and how they have hated me ever since I killed their Primogen not long after moving to the city. Elvira had been still new to the office of Prince and the woman, Marie Krentz, had been badmouthing her at a very public affair to celebrate Elvira taking over. With the Prince's permission, I ended her unlife for her treachery and ever since, the Toreador of the city have called me The Enforcer. I don't know if it's meant to mock or scare others.

"Does this have something to do with the man you were involved with before, your domitor?" Rafe asked hesitantly, like he didn't want to talk about my old lover any more than I did. I pulled away from him and walked further into the room, going to stand next to the dresser that held his computer. I knew I had to tell him about Michael at some point but now wasn't the time. I was afraid if Rafe knew about him that he would in some way think I was wrong for wanting the embrace like Michael did and leave as well. I couldn't bare that.

"My enemies are my own," I said, sounding far off. "Although Michael was a excellent teacher in how to acquire them. Sometimes you do more damage by yourself."

"'The female of the species is more deadly than the male'," Rafe quoted as he came up behind me. I had heard it from somewhere but couldn't remember where. I knew I needed to change the subject before I said things I didn't want to so I turned to face him and said, "I should probably get ready. I didn't check the answering machine before I came looking for you."

He smiled and caressed my cheek with his knuckles. "Okay, come on and I'll wash your back." We laughed together as we went down to the second floor and all thoughts of Michael left my mind.

Chapter 13: Salt in the Wound

*"I'm all through with lovin' you
Wasting my precious time on you."
Cher
"Takin' Back My Heart"*

Rafe went into the bathroom to start the shower while I checked the machine that was on the vanity in the bedroom. There was only one message on the machine and it was from Elvira. She wanted to ask me to pick up Angel from the train depot. His train would be in at eight o'clock and she wanted me to take him by the house she was letting him use then bring him to the Chantry to meet her.

Rafe and I showered together, playfully washing each other at first before Rafe pressed my back against the wall and we made love under the spray of warm water. It was a first for me and I found it absolutely intoxicating. When we finally left the bathroom it was almost seven and we had to dress quickly to pick Angel up on time. I finished first so that left me with the ample opportunity to watch Rafe. I was relieved when he picked up the Glock in its holster after he put his shirt on and tucked it in the small of his back.

"Why are you watching me?" he asked as he moved to the dresser and took a pair of socks out of a drawer.

"I think I need to call Gary and arrange for a pair of Glocks for you." I was a little embarrassed that he had caught me watching him.

"Who's Gary?"

"He owns the army surplus store down on Derby Street. He's a Brujah ghoul who helps us with weapons." I moved to the phone and dialed the number to the store. The conversation was short and just as I was finishing; I heard the doorbell ring. Rafe was still barefooted but took his shoes and socks with him to answer the door. I followed as soon as I hung up and I heard the door shut as I came down the stairs.

"Who was it?" I asked adjusting the back of an earring that felt tight. I looked up and saw that Rafe was holding a bouquet of red roses and my heart dropped to the floor. From time to time over the past couple of years Michael would send me a dozen red roses as a way to remind me of him or something. It was the only form of communication I'd had with him and it drove me crazy every time they arrived. I didn't think Rafe had bought them because the look on his face clearly said he didn't know who they were from.

"Some guy dropped them off for you," Rafe replied as I came off the last step. "He didn't look like a devilry person though. He had really short hair and glasses."

Birkoff, I thought to myself as I passed Rafe and went directly to the door, hoping to catch a glimpse and confirm my suspicions. What would Birkoff be doing here? He was Michael's ghoul that he had taken on because of the man's computer genius. The guy was amazing with computers and in Michael's line of work, a hacker came in real handy. When I got to the front door, I saw only a basic sedan pulling out of the drive. I couldn't see the driver, it was too dark. If it was Birkoff though that could mean only one thing, Michael couldn't be far behind. He didn't let Birkoff go too far.

I returned inside and took the flowers from Rafe quietly. "I'll go get a vase," he said but I was oblivious. How could Michael do this again? Just when I thought I had gotten him out of my mind here he was putting himself right back in it. He didn't play fair, not at all.

I removed the card from the envelope and read the carefully written words that I recognized, as Michael's own handwriting: *You are never far from my thoughts. We will be together soon. -M.*

I was devastated, wondering again how Michael thought he could just walk into my life again without so much as a by your leave. Rafe came back with a heavy crystal vase that was half filled with water. "Who are they from? A secret admirer?" he asked playfully with a bit of apprehension.

"Michael. They're from Michael," I said softly, not knowing how he would react.

He was silent for a moment but I could tell he was upset because his hand that he was holding the vase in was shaking and his knuckles were white. Without warning, the thick crystal shattered in his hand, cutting it terribly and littering the floor with shards of glass.

I stood horrified as blood covered his hand and dripped on the floor to mix with the sharp remains of the vase and the water that had been in it. I threw the roses to the floor and rushed to Rafe's side as he began to back away from the messy pool at his feet, cutting them as well.

Jorell was in the hall now too and I shooed him away before he cut his little paws. He circled over to where the flowers had landed and sniffed. All of a sudden the puppy began to bark viciously, as if an intruder were here to do us all harm.

"Stop, Rafe," I cried grabbing his wounded hand and trying to get him to stand still. "Jorell, hush. We need to get this cleaned out before you can heal it." Rafe's face was contorted in pain although it wasn't that bad. I got a good look at his hand and saw that while there were many cuts on his palm and fingers that were filled with glass shards, none were very deep and once cleaned properly he would be fine. I manipulated my blood into increase my strength because I knew I would have to carry him until he was at least past the mess of glass so his feet weren't cut worse and I couldn't do it normally. Rafe protested at first when I put an arm around his waist and lifted him, I suppose because he thought it unmanly to be carried by a woman but I was in no mood for macho bullshit.

"Let me help you," I said using Dominate once I had eye contact with him. He complied and we made our way downstairs where I carefully cleaned the glass from his feet and hand in the sink, letting cool water run over them. We were silent during the entire process and I was worried about what was running through Rafe's head.

The cuts on the bottom of his feet were small and stopped bleeding without aide. His hand was another matter, though. When it was free of the sharp material I brought it to my lips and slowly licked each wound closed. "Are you okay?" I asked looking up at him while still holding his hand close to me.

"Why wouldn't I be," he scoffed. "It's not like it would be a big deal or anything." What the hell are you talking about? I wanted to scream at him not understanding where the big attitude was coming from. Of course it would be a huge deal if he were hurt or uncomfortable in any way.

"Why did you say that?" I asked astonished. "Do you think you mean so little to me?"

"Forget it," he replied harshly, pulling his hand away and turning to look out the window that was over the sink. I felt the tears well in my eyes and crossed the room quickly so he wouldn't see them. I didn't understand why he was acting this way. Hadn't I been concerned enough over his well being? Didn't I do the same thing anyone else would if someone they cared about was hurt and bleeding? What did I do that was so wrong for Rafe to treat me like this?

Unbeknownst to me, Rafe had seen me cross the room and had followed behind. When he reached me he turned me in his arms and pulled me to his chest. "I'm sorry," he said, kissing the top of my head. "Forgive me. I don't know what came over me."

Once again, my face was buried in my hands to keep Rafe from seeing the blood tears in my eyes. He took them gently into his when I didn't respond, cradling them. Using an index finger, Rafe lifted my head so that I looked into his eyes. Then he leaned down and delicately kissed my cheeks. "Brenda, I'm sorry," he repeated. "I know Michael is important to you and that you love him. If you want me to leave then I will. 'Things have changed. I won't concur and won't betray my sorrow save I'll always dress in black and rave'," he quoted.

"How can you say that?" I asked astonished. "Michael may have been important to me at one point, but I care for you. Michael is the past, Rafe, you're the present." I saw the tears in his eyes and knew I had chosen well in this man to spend my life with. It was I this time that gathered him to me and held him close. I understood now why he had acted the way he had and vowed to make him more secure in our relationship. I knew I would have to tell him about Michael at some point but this wasn't the time.

Jorell started to bark at our heels, indicating his need to be let out, and we both laughed. "We're going to be late," I said. "I'll run upstairs and get you a new shirt. You let the puppy out before he pees on the floor."

We were out of the house ten minutes later and I was afraid we would be late to pick Angel up. When we arrived at the station, however, I was relieved to find the train was running late, it was 8:15 and it still wasn't here yet. The wait was short though and soon we were watching passengers disembark and was I surprised to see a fellow Tremere step off the train. Zora Yale was the assistant Chantry leader and as far as I could tell, a nice person. We exchanged pleasantries and she went off to meet the man who was waiting for her.

"There's something up with that guy," Rafe said leaning down to whisper in my ear. "He's different like you, but not like you."

"Really?" I asked, marveling at Rafe's gift. I thought again how happy I was that he had agreed to become my ghoul. "Any ideas?"

"Shape shifter if I had to make a guess, but I'm not sure." I filed the information away for now because I saw Angel enter the station then, a large duffel bag over one shoulder. I smiled and started forward, Rafe close behind. I had only met Angel once and that was in Nashville when I was helping Sarah to hunt down her brother. I had liked the Kindred, though. He was quiet and withdrawn from Kindred society. I was hoping to get the chance to know him better now that he was moving to Salem.

"Angel," I said warmly when we were close enough. I held out my hand and he took it. His grip was strong, not enough to hurt but I could tell he was holding back because I was a woman. "It's good to see you again."

"Good to see you, too," he replied, looking a little guilty before he continued. "I forgot to let anyone know, there's someone with me. I hope it's okay." It was the most I think I had ever heard him say at once. I wondered if the rumors weren't true and that he hadn't broken off with the Slayer from Nashville. If that were the case, I thought Elvira would have a problem with the girl being in town with Angel.

"Is she a petite blond?" I asked thinking of Buffy Summers.

His face took on a sad expression. "No," was all he said and that was low.

Just then I heard a female voice call, "Angel" and saw the named person actually cringe a little. I looked past him to see a tall girl with long dark hair motioning a steward who was totally loaded down with luggage in our direction. I read her aura and knew she wasn't

Kindred or anything else connected to us like a ghoul. I wondered who she was but didn't ask Angel. I knew he valued his privacy over everything.

When the girl joined us, Angel introduced her as Cordelia Chase and said that she would be staying with him until she could find a place of her own. She knew of the Masquerade and had agreed to keep her mouth shut. I didn't think Elvira would have a problem with her as long as she minded her P's and Q's.

We managed to get Angel, his friend and all her luggage in Rafe's car and were on our way without much hassle. Cordelia reminded me of a homecoming queen. She talked a mile a minute and failed to realize when everyone else in the car was annoyed. I felt bad for Angel who had to live with her.

"Do you mind if we make a stop on the way?" I asked when I could get a word in. Gary had told me earlier that I could stop in at any time after eight to pick up the guns for Rafe.

"Of course," Angel said from the backseat he shared with Cordelia. "The Prince won't mind the delay?"

"Oh no. It will only take a minute." I gave Rafe directions to the store and we pulled in the parking lot a short time later. "I won't be long," I said getting out of the car and fingering the inside pocket of my jacket to make sure I had my checkbook.

The transaction was quick and I walked out with a pair of Glock 17's that matched my own and a figure eight. As I approached the car I noticed a van parked across the street. Upon further inspection, I realized it was the piece of shit that Rafe and I had ditched the night before. This time, however, there was only the girl who had sat in the passenger seat. I diverted from the car and headed in her direction, intent on knowing why the girl kept popping up.

I had only taken a few steps though when the van started and pulled away. Not, however, without the girl giving me the once over as she drove by. Oh well, I thought to myself. I guess I'll have to wait to see what she wanted. I didn't like it though, not one bit. Something told me that this girl was going to do nothing but bring trouble and a bad case of heartburn. Time will tell.

I returned to the car where Rafe asked if everything was okay. I said yes and we continued on to Elvira's old house. She lived there before becoming Prince and it was a beautiful two level Victorian.

Rafe and I helped with the bags and we stayed long enough to give Angel and Cordelia a quick tour. Cordelia started to complain about one thing and another and Angel took her aside rather roughly. When they returned, she was much more docile and actually muttered an apology. I wondered if the girl was unaware of what I was and that Angel had told her to get this kind of response out of the girl. Great if that's all it took.

Chapter 14: Loyalty

*"I have faith in nights."
Rainer Maria Rilke
"You Darkness"*

The three of us traveled on to the Chantry, leaving Cordelia behind to begin the long task of unpacking her numerous suitcases. Terry, a house ghoul, answered the door and led us to the ballroom where another ghoul was playing a rather depressing overture on the grand piano. Elvira was standing by the fireplace and Zane was sitting on the floor, close by her side.

When she didn't notice us right away, I cleared my throat and said, "My Prince, are you alright?"

She blinked and turned to face us, a careful smile on her lips. "Brenda. Of course I'm fine. It's good to see you this evening. And this must be Angel. How are you?" She held her hand out to him and Angel stepped forward to kiss the back of it. I could tell she was lying about being okay but I didn't know what could have been wrong. I would have to ask later.

Zane stood and the introductions were made. We all stood together in front of the fireplace and talked for a few moments before the ballroom doors slammed open and Micky stalked in followed closely by Sarah and Ford Radek, the Chantry leader. Micky was incredibly pissed off and I wondered what on earth had happened.

Micky didn't stop until he stood face to face with Elvira. "My Prince," he seethed. "Is there something you forgot to tell me?"

I gasped his name as Sarah came to stand just behind him. She laid her hand on his shoulder as if to stop him. Elvira was the perfect picture of calm as she looked him up and down before saying, "Is there a problem, childe?"

"I met another childe of yours," was all he said.

Her eyes grew huge and I saw Angel take a few steps to the side to better position himself in case of trouble. Zane's gaze on Micky was all daggers and I half expected him to jump Micky. I think he knew better, though, because he stayed where he was. "What are you talking about?" Elvira asked. If it were possible she had paled in the brightly-lit room and I thought she looked like she would faint.

"I was downtown checking on a lead about the Sabbat pack when a big black guy grabbed me and threw me against a wall." Micky wasn't calming down at all. In fact he was growing madder the longer he looked at the Prince. I noticed for the first time that there was blood on his neck and when I looked closer I saw what appeared to be claw marks on his white skin. A Gangrel? I thought to myself. I couldn't think of a member of that clan in town who would dare lay their hands on Micky like that. Everyone knew that he could take care of himself but anyone with any brains would also know they would have to deal with the entire clan in town as well. Not a good thing.

"He told me the only reason I still lived was because of our mutual sire," Micky continued. He glanced at the hand Elvira was holding to her throat and said, "He also asked if you still wore the ring he gave you." There wasn't a ring on her hand but after Micky said that her hand moved to her cleavage as if checking to make sure something was still there.

"Micky," Ford said trying to calm him. "She never told you that you were her only childe." He looked to Elvira who had turned to face the fireplace. It appeared as if she could hardly stand.

"Are you alright, my Prince?" I asked, stepping forward to stand next to Micky, who appeared to be finally calming a bit.

"I was in love when I was still mortal," Elvira said to no one in particular. "I met Ford and jumped at his offer of the embrace. I wanted to share my gift with the man I loved but Ford warned me that embracing someone for that was forbidden so I ghouled him."

She took a moment to take a deep breath before continuing. "Twenty years later I embraced him anyway. We argued over the politics of the Kindred in the city and my sire whom I cared for very much." Elvira looked over her shoulder then to glance at Ford and he smiled at her encouragingly.

"He left within ten years of me giving him the gift. I had heard he was killed in New York in 1823." I glanced to Ford and could clearly read the shock in his face. It looked as if there was something this old Kindred wasn't telling.

Elvira must have seen it as well. "What do you know?" she asked him, her eyes narrowing.

"I knew he lived," Ford began as he took a step toward her, "but I thought it would bring you only pain to know he still existed without you. He went to Africa in the middle of the last century." The room was silent as Elvira clenched her fists at her sides.

"Is that all?" she asked coldly.

"No. He joined the Sabbat fifty years ago." Elvira looked as if her heart had just been ripped out. She visibly leaned against the mantle of the fireplace while keeping a hard stare on Ford.

"I can't believe you kept this from me," she said finally.

"Elvira, I thought it was in your best interest to –"

"I have the status and age to figure out what I need to know," the Prince interrupted coldly. "How can you trust me to run the city if I don't have all the facts? What would have happened if he had shown up before my hold on the city was secured?" Her tone wasn't friendly and I grew increasingly worried.

"I trust you to do what's right, Elvira. Just as you know I was right to keep this from you."

"I believe you are wrong," she hissed. "You didn't approve of Akari from the beginning and drove him away out of spite." She sounded frantic now and I didn't know what to do to stop this but someone had to.

"He was too weak for you," Ford scoffed. "You would have been dissatisfied with him in a century."

"My Prince," I said holding up a hand, "let's not say things in anger that cannot be taken back." When Elvira's cold stare turned to me I thought I should have died on the spot. She didn't say anything to me, however. She returned her gaze to Ford.

"You have done something I never expected you to do. You have betrayed me. I cannot have a Judas under my roof. Leave my house." My mouth fell open. She couldn't be serious. Elvira couldn't kick the leader out of the Chantry, it was unheard of. What would this say to the rest of the Kindred in the city? Would they take this as a sign of weakness and think they could take over? Mentally, I ran through the list of possible clans and the Brujah were at the top of my list.

Ford bowed respectfully at the waist and said, "As you wish, my Prince." Then he turned and left, silence now looming over the room. I expected Elvira to go after him and have a private conversation in her study and everything would be all right. She didn't, though, and my worries increased.

Micky went to her side and laid a hand on her upper arm. "I am sorry, my son," she said, turning to him. "If I had known this wouldn't have happened. I would have made sure of it."

"Then it's true?" I heard Micky ask. Oh great, I thought to myself, knowing that to speak against the Prince could mean my final death so I kept my mouth shut. I started to pace nervously and didn't care if anyone didn't like it. Elvira was putting us all in jeopardy with her actions and here she was making promises to Micky that had no bearing on anything. Didn't she understand what was at stake here? Her seat as Prince could only be as secure as the clan members who backed her. When Elvira took over as Prince there was much opposition by Beth's descendants but because we are all Tremere the riptides soon faded.

I was vaguely aware of Rafe moving to the side of the room to sit on a low bench as Elvira pulled out from under her blouse a ring that hung from a chain around her neck. "Akari gave this to me shortly before he left. This is the first time I've ever taken it off," she said as she handed it to Micky. "You must keep this safe. He will want it."

"Why haven't I seen this before?" Micky asked taking the ring and studying it. I knew that when Micky was first turned he and Elvira had been intimate and I was surprised that he wouldn't know of the rings existence.

"It was never important," was all she said. I hadn't stopped pacing and it was then that Elvira noticed. She gave me a disapproving look and called me forward. I complied. "Brenda, I need you to contact all clan members to meet at Jesters in one hour. There is a list on my desk if you need it."

"Of course, my Prince," I said a little stiffly. I turned toward the door and Rafe soon fell into step with me. I wanted to get out of the house fast before I said something that I would regret and this assignment from the Prince was as good a reason as any. Rafe asked a few questions on the way out and I answered them as best I could, but I didn't really have any answers. Time will tell, I told myself.

I noticed a few clan members in the library as we passed by and I entered to tell them about the meeting so I wouldn't have to try them by phone. Prudence, Tyler and Dena were all members of Beth's lineage and the remaining member at the table was Alden, the Tremere Primogen, and he was one of Ford's childer. From the conversation I picked up as I approached the table they didn't know what had happened yet between the Prince and Chantry leader.

"The Prince has called a clan meeting at Jesters in an hour," I said when Alden noticed me. They all agreed they would be there and I was glad none of them tried to pry me for information. They wouldn't have gotten any.

Rafe and I went on to Elvira's study where I found the list she spoke of and made the calls while Rafe busied himself by looking at the books on the shelves. When I was finished we returned to the ballroom but Elvira had already left for Jesters with Micky and Sarah. I didn't know what happened to Angel but I figured that someone else had taken him home. On the way over to Jesters, I readied Rafe's new guns and he slipped the figure eight on before we went in.

I noticed the piece of shit van was parked in the lot and I smiled a little. Perhaps my female stalker was inside and I would get a chance to finally speak with her. I was feeling a little edgy and welcomed the chance to confront the girl.

After Rafe and I entered I saw that Malachi, the Brujah Primogen and his ghoul, Honey, were there as well as Ayslenn, Rafe's friend from the Cenaculum. I wasn't surprised to see that my new shadow was with her, thus proving my suspicions that the girl was a hunter. Close to the door that led to the conference room was a table with many Tremere clan

member ghouls and I realized Rafe probably wouldn't be able to go up there with me. Ethan approached and greeted me saying that he would escort Rafe to the table and introduce him around. I nodded and headed for the stairs.

Once in the conference room Elvira asked that I sit next to Zane who was on her right and I thought the request odd. Usually I sat much further down the table during clan meetings because I was after all still a neonate. Experience is something that comes with time to Kindred and neonate is a term used to describe a vampire that hasn't been embraced over fifty years. Anyway, most of the others were there and I quietly took my seat, still not sure of how I felt. I understood the betrayal Elvira felt but I also thought that as Prince she should set an example and put on a good face for the rest of the Kindred. It was her duty.

The few remaining members arrived and Elvira took her seat to start the meeting. To those who weren't aware of the happenings earlier, Ford was mysteriously absent. When everyone was settled Elvira gave a brief overview what we knew of the Sabbat, which wasn't much. "The packs plans are unknown at this point so it is important that the clan be united to ensure the city," the Prince said glancing up and down the table. "There is a Tremere Antitribu with them and he must be killed at all cost."

I knew many of them had to be wondering where Ford was and what had happened at the Chantry between him and Elvira. I also knew she was trying to put on a good show for the clan that I hoped worked out for her. I too glanced around the room, trying to gage the thoughts of my fellow clan members. Most of their auras ranged from confusion to suspicion, emotions I totally understood giving the crisis we now faced.

"We can hold the city," Elvira continued. "Any questions?"

"Why isn't Ford here?" Zora asked leaning forward in her chair at the other end of the long table.

"His path has led him elsewhere," Elvira replied coolly as she eyed the other woman haughtily.

"Has he left the city?" Audrey asked from beside Zora.

"I don't believe so."

"I have spoke to him," Alden inputted from the chair next to mine. "He said he was told to leave the Chantry. Wh-"

"Do you question your Prince?" Elvira's tone was becoming dangerous. I glanced to the head of the table in time to see Micky reach inside his jacket to where I knew there was a gun. Are they all crazy? I thought to myself. Would every single one of them just sit here and let this situation deteriorate to the point where we resort to pulling guns on each other? For the first time in my vampiric existence I was ashamed to be Tremere. However, being the loyal clan member I tried to be, I adjusted myself in the chair in case I had to pull my gun to protect Elvira.

"Ford made his choice a long time ago," Elvira was staring to Alden. "Any other questions?"

"Do you expect us to deal with this without Ford?" Zora spoke up again and this time she sounded very angry.

"Of course not. Ford is very valuable to the clan. Deal with him as you would before. Just remember that I am the Prince."

The meeting pretty much ended then. Elvira let every one know there would be a clan wide meeting at midnight the next evening at Alisa's, a restaurant that she owned. Alden and Zora left soon after as glasses of blood were passed around the room for those who cared to partake. Groups of allies had formed around the room with Elvira, Zane, Micky and Sarah standing close to the chair that Elvira had occupied during the meeting. I stood off to the

side, not talking to anyone, sipping from a crystal goblet of blood and trying to gage Elvira's stand of things.

Micky kept glancing over his shoulder at me and I noticed the longer I stayed away from them the cooler Elvira seemed toward me. I knew I couldn't let my feelings over how wrong I thought she was get in the way of our relationship so I finally crossed the room slowly and came to stand between Sarah and Zane.

"Ah, Brenda," the Prince said eyeing me carefully. Micky seemed relieved to see that I had come over. "Where is your Rafael?" After the business part of the meeting was over the ghouls were allowed to join their masters over cocktails.

"He is still downstairs, my Prince," I said with a small smile. "Did you want to see him?"

"No, no, childe. It was my thought that being he was a new ghoul that you would want to keep him as close as possible."

"You're right, my Prince." We discussed possible strategies on how to end the Sabbat problem quickly and I found myself thinking again of the roses that arrived at the house earlier and how Rafe had reacted. I thought that maybe I could get some advice from Micky on how best to approach the subject of Michael with him.

I asked Micky if I could have a private word with him upstairs. I was sure Rafe would be brought up soon and I didn't know when I would have another opportunity to speak with Micky alone. He agreed and we soon found ourselves upstairs in the apartment he and Sarah shared.

Chapter 15: Shoot Out

*"To think of my task is chilling.
To know I was carefully building
The mask I was wearing for two years,
Swearing I'd tear it off."*

10,000 Maniacs

"Jezebel"

"Can I get you something?" Micky asked as I settled myself on the couch.

"Please." I hadn't fed in a couple of days and figured I might as well fill up. I wasn't comfortable feeding in front of Rafe yet but I knew that was something he would have to become used to soon enough. Micky went into his lab area where I knew he stored his own supply of what we liked to call Capri Sun packs and returned a few minutes later with tall tumbler of my substance of choice.

"Why did it take you so long to choose sides?" he asked seriously as he sat next to me.

"What are you talking about?" Laughter was apparent in my voice. "I didn't choose any side. There isn't a choice to make."

"Of course there is. Either you are with Elvira or you're not, Brenda. There's no middle ground." What on earth was he talking about? I know I've only been in Salem for two years but come on; didn't I have the right to my own opinion?

"Listen Micky, I won't lie to you, I don't agree with Elvira's actions tonight. There's deep shit going down all around us and we need to be strong as a clan, not to mention that under normal circumstances the fact that the Chantry leader is forbidden to enter the Chantry is virtually unheard of."

"Brenda I understand your concerns but you must let Elvira do what she thinks is best, not only for the clan but for the city as well. She won't endanger her position. I can't believe you'd say anything against her."

"Don't get me wrong," I said turning on the couch to better converse with him. "My loyalties are not in question here. I know Elvira is the best thing for Salem and for the Tremere clan. I'm worried about the kind of example we're setting for the rest of the clans by allowing this turmoil to be so visible." I had to make Micky understand that he and the Prince didn't have to worry about what I would do in a time of crisis but I also felt the need to convey my personal outlook on the situation.

"I see," Micky said with his fingers on his chin. "I knew we didn't have to worry about your loyalties but I think Elvira wondered. To be honest, I don't think that she will hold Ford's knowledge of Akari still being alive against him for long. We'll just have to wait and see. Hey, didn't you want to talk to me about something?"

"Yes actually. I wanted you to know that another bouquet of roses arrived tonight." I had always let Micky know about Michael's deliveries when they happened but not because he was the head of security for the clan but because he was my friend and I knew I could talk to him about anything. "I'm afraid that it might have been one of his ghouls that got into the house and tried to kill me."

Micky was silent for a moment, taking in what I had told him and processing it for further use. "Do you think he's involved with the Sabbat or just in the area?"

"I really don't know. I hope he's not with them because I know he wouldn't be allowed to live, no matter what he did for Elvira in the past. I'm just afraid of what Rafe will do." The empty glass had begun to shake in my hand when Micky had first asked about Michael being

with the Sabbath and before I knew what happened it shattered in my hand much like the vase did earlier for Rafe. "Damn," I muttered as I slid forward and tried to keep from getting any blood on Micky's couch. He also moved to gather the broken bits of glass off my lap and the cushion. "I'm sorry, Micky. I don't know what came over me."

"It's alright, Brenda. Are you okay?" I nodded as I glanced down at my palm. There were only a few small cuts and I was able to heal them naturally. Micky continued, "What do you mean Rafe? What happened?"

"When Rafe found out who the roses were from he pulled the trick I just did only with the crystal vase Elvira gave me for Christmas. Look, I feel really silly about breaking your glass..."

"Don't worry," he laughed. "God, it's not like it was my favorite Grecian urn or anything." He carefully put the broken glass in a large ashtray on the coffee table and said, "I would keep an eye on Rafe if Michael is in town. He might do something stupid." Just as he settled against the back of the couch a knock sounded on the door that led downstairs. Micky got up and went to answer it. It was Rafe.

"The Prince asked me to come and get the both of you," he said looking past Micky to me and I stood.

Micky glanced back at me and I asked, "Can you give us a minute?"

"Sure," he smiled. "I'll see you downstairs." He left and shut the door behind him.

"Brenda, what happened to your pants?" Rafe asked hesitantly as he approached me intent on my leg. I glanced down and saw that some blood had dripped on my thigh and I hoped he didn't freak.

"Nothing," I said brushing the spot. It was small and I was really surprised that he even saw it. I thought that maybe it was a sign that he was developing the heightened senses of Auspex through my blood and I knew that I would have to test those abilities later. I grabbed his hand and pulled him closer so that he had to stand straight, taking his attention away from the blood on my pants. "I missed you," I whispered.

He smiled and leaned down to place a soft kiss on my lips. "Everything okay?" he asked.

"Yeah. Were you making friends like a good boy?" I asked coyly. He laughed and pulled me to him again for an earth-shattering kiss that left me craving more but I knew we had to get downstairs to Elvira. We broke apart and went downstairs to find that the Prince, Zane, Micky and Sarah were the only ones left in the conference room.

Elvira asked Rafe to wait down in the club, that I would be done soon. He went to her and took her hand, kissed it and left the room. Elvira turned and studied each of us in turn as if she were sizing us up for a mission of some kind. "I have asked you to remain because I want you all to know that I trust you with my life. Do any of you have a problem with that?" She never looked at me but I had the feeling that I was the cause for this show of fidelity.

We all agreed that we would protect the Prince with our lives but I felt that she needed more proof from me. I took a step forward and knelt in front of her. "I swear on my life that I will do whatever my Prince asks of me. Even if it means that I must forfeit my own life."

Elvira placed her hand on my shoulder and smiled down at me. "Thank you, childe," she said. "Rise. Your oath is accepted." I stood and kissed her cheek before returning to stand next to Micky.

Elvira and Zane left after that. I also found myself saying good night to Micky and Sarah. "I think I'll take a quick drive by the Cenaculum," I said as I went to the door that would once again take me to the lower level.

"Be careful," was all Micky said as I shut the door behind me.

Ethan was in sight when I entered the bar. It was getting late and the crowd had thinned a bit so it was easy for me to pick out Rafe standing by the stage talking to someone. The band was taking a break and the bar was relatively quiet. I couldn't quite make out who it was that Rafe was talking with so I hurried across the floor to meet him. I nodded to Ethan as I went by him and he nodded his head in the direction of the pool tables. The Inquisition members were there and seemed to be behaving themselves for now.

As I approached Rafe I realized that it was the Brujah Primogen, Malachi that he was speaking to and I wondered what had brought this encounter on. The protective side of me came out and my pace quickened to cover the remaining feet that would bring me to them.

"Can I help you?" I asked the Brujah elder a little too crisply.

He smiled slyly as he gave me a once over. "No, thank you. The young man and I were just talking about the nightlife. I take it he belongs to you?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact." I couldn't believe how bitchy I was being to him but he was Brujah after all. Just be glad he isn't Toreador, I thought to myself.

Malachi's attention returned to Rafe and it looked as if he wanted to gobble him up. "Tell me," he said so low I almost didn't hear him, "how does he taste?"

I was flabbergasted to say the least and before I could stop myself I retorted, "Wouldn't you like to know?"

He raised an eyebrow at me then looked Rafe up and down again. If he didn't get out of here soon I thought I would kill him with my bare hands for looking at what was mine. Temper, temper, I thought as I tried to control myself. It wouldn't be good to go killing a member of the conclave without permission, even if it was a Brujah.

Malachi's smile appeared again as he gave Rafe a wink before turning to me to say, "Perhaps one day I will." And with that, he turned on his heel and walked to the door where his ghoul, Honey, was waiting for him.

"Brenda, who was that?" Rafe asked from behind me.

"Trouble." What in the hell was I thinking talking to him like that? He probably wants nothing more than to take a big ol' drink out of Rafe now thanks to my mouth. I felt really stupid and had only my possessive tendencies to blame. Maybe there was something I could do to make amends.

Rafe put his hand on my upper arm and I was grateful for his presence. I would think of something to keep him safe. I turned into him and his arms went around my waist just as mine did the same. As we held each other I looked over his shoulder and was completely surprised to see Mr. GQ from the other night, whom I later found out to be Roger Campbell. He was just standing there by the back entrance, smoking a cigar. I was even further shocked to see that Birkoff stood next to him. If these were our Sabbat buddies then there wasn't a doubt in my mind now that Michael was among them and my heart sank.

I glanced over my shoulder and was glad to see that Ethan was standing in the same area that he had been when I first came downstairs. I had to warn Micky. When I looked back to the rear entrance Birkoff was gone, leaving Roger by himself. "Rafe, go to Ethan and tell him to get Micky," I said lowly, pretending to kiss his cheek. "We have company."

Rafe stiffened in my arms and when he started to turn around to get a look for himself I grabbed his arm, "No, don't look, just get Micky and tell him to leave Sarah upstairs." I knew Sarah could take care of herself but I couldn't forget the fact that any one of the Inquisition members here might recognize her and alert the others that she was still alive. Rafe pulled away hesitantly and though I wanted to watch his back I didn't check his progress as he crossed the room. My eyes were on the vampire by the door. He saw me and we

stared at each other for a moment before I nodded to him slightly and he smiled as he returned the gesture.

Micky came up with Rafe a few minutes later and I hugged Micky like a long lost friend. "What's up?" he asked in my ear.

"I think there's a member of the Sabbat pack by the door. He's the one wearing the suit." I was a little breathless with anticipation, wanting a confrontation and equally not wanting it. The prospect was thrilling.

Just as Micky turned to have a look at Roger the door next him opened and the other two I saw him with the other night came in, both carrying large shotguns.

"Get these people out of here," Micky said as he reached into his jacket and pulled his gun.

I did the same, pulling the matching Glocks from their holsters and holding them in the air above my head. "Everybody out!" I yelled as I used my supernatural blood to increase my strength. With so many weapons visible the crowd didn't take long to begin clearing the way. Some took cover under tables and I prayed that none of the innocents would be hurt in the upcoming firefight.

When I turned back from the crowd I found that Rafe had turned the nearest table on its side and we both dove under it as the bullets started to fly. When I had the chance, I took a shot and nicked the guy in the tee shirt on the arm, not doing much damage. With him being a vampire he was able to heal the wound quickly and not be slowed down at all.

I saw his companion fall back and realized that Rafe had shot at him and had done much better in his aim than I had. More bullets were flying and I saw that the Inquisition members were also firing at the Sabbat.

Micky was doing what he could to make sure that his customers were getting out safely. I glanced back at the door that led to the conference room to see if Sarah had appeared because she had heard the gun shots and saw that somehow Roger had slipped by Rafe and I and was now standing next to the door.

Without hesitation I raised my gun and fired at him. As soon as the gun went off a shadow enveloped the doorway and about three feet on either side of it, leading me to believe that Roger had to be Lasombra.

"He's after Sarah," I said as I started in that direction keeping low to avoid being shot. When I reached the edge of the shadow I saw that Rafe had followed me and I was thankful for his loyalty. "Stay here," I told him as I edged closer to the darkness.

"I'm coming with you."

I turned and clearly saw the concern on his face. I knew I couldn't let him go up there with me because I didn't know what other disciplines this guy had. I couldn't watch my ass as well as his. How could I make him understand?

"Rafe, you need to stay here. Micky may need you." Which was true. Ethan was still here and was doing what he could to keep the Sabbat at bay but God only knew how many more were waiting outside and I didn't want to short hand Micky.

"No." He edged closer to me, fully intending to go upstairs with me. Shit.

"Rafe just stay here. I can't protect you both of us. Besides, I need you to make sure no one else goes up there."

He thought for a moment and time was ticking. If he followed, he followed. Sarah was alone and I needed to get to the second floor. I holstered one gun and entered the shadow. I used the wall to feel my way to there I knew the door was. Once there, I holstered the other gun, needing both hands to maneuver. Lasombra shadows are pitch black inside and tend to distort your senses so I knew I had to take care.

When I reached the door I found that it was ajar. I pushed it open wider and entered the stairwell carefully finding the stairs and going up. The shadow ended about five steps from the top and I could see blood on the steps. Good, I must have hit him with that shot, I thought to myself as I drew a gun and finished climbing.

The door at the top of the stairs was open as well. I crouched lower in case Roger was in the room and slowly pushed the door open until it hit the wall. The room was empty so I stood and entered. There was a trail of blood that led to the door that Micky and I had used earlier to enter the apartment. Along with the blood, there was a small pile of cigar ashes next to the door. I used my heightened senses but couldn't hear anything from the second floor.

The stairway was empty and my nerves were on edge. If I didn't find this son of a bitch soon I was going to throw caution to the wind and just storm the castle so to speak. I opened the door at the top in the same manner I had the one in the conference room. There was a male voice coming deep from within the apartment, the bedroom area if my guess was correct. There was a touch pad near the door and I hit the silent alarm button. Serious backup was just minutes away.

Chapter 16: Feelings of Betrayal

*"I'll tell you something
I am a demon
Some say my biggest weakness."
Garbage
"#1 Crush"*

I followed the voice deeper into the apartment and as I thought, the invader was in the bedroom Micky and Sarah shared. The door was slightly ajar so my presence wouldn't be quickly detected.

"The Ghost told me about you, Sarah, that you were a member of the Inquisition. They killed my sire, you know, and I have always wanted one to do with as I pleased." As he spoke I could tell that his voice had a slight English accent. There was movement that sounded as if it were against a wall and I peaked in the room through the crack between the door and the jam to find that Sarah's face was pressed against the opposite wall. Tentacles of shadows that I had seen Bruce use before were holding her hands together. I knew that nothing short of the Kindred dissolving those tendrils himself or him dying would release Sarah's hands.

Silently, I pushed the door open wider and crouched low. Roger didn't hear me; he was intent on tormenting Sarah. "Do you want me to feed from you?" he asked. From my new vantage point I could see that Sarah's feet were bound by shadows and that one gagged her as well. "You know, the Ghost told me how sweet you tasted. Does this position feel familiar to you?" There were blood tears rolling down Sarah's cheeks as he spoke, "But wait, I think there's one little detail I forgot."

Shadowy tendrils rose from the floor and stripped the skirt and shirt from Sarah's slender frame. Trying to keep myself from launching in the room at this bastard, I used my blood to increase my dexterity and strength, preparing for the impending fight. I knew if I were going to do something I had to do it fast because as soon as the other Kindred knew I was there I would probably be held by shadow too.

I kicked the door open the rest of the way and quickly fired three shots. As I had expected, my hands were encased in inky blackness and I couldn't squeeze the trigger again.

"Ah, Brenda," Roger said smugly. "It's good to see you."

"It's good to be seen," I replied smoothly. No use letting this jerk get to me.

His smile was oily and fierce and I had to admit that I was a little frightened of him but I knew I couldn't show it. My only hope, and Sarah's, was that someone from downstairs would come along soon and kill this guy.

"I have been waiting for the opportunity to speak with you, my dear. I've heard so many interesting things about you."

"I'm sure you have," I said calmly. "And to whom do I have the honor of thanking for speaking so highly of me."

"Oh, I think you know who." He was so smug I wanted to slap him.

"Well, you must give him my regards." It had to be Michael. I had no doubt, now. Only he would hang with someone this greasy.

I was still using Auspex so I was able to hear someone enter the apartment. I hoped it was Micky or someone else who was coming to help us. I kept him talking so that whoever it was knew where we were.

"Oh, I'll be sure to," Roger said as his fangs dropped. "As you well know, 'the female of the species is more deadly than the male'." His tone was mocking in nature and the next thing I knew, he launched himself and attached his mouth to Sarah's neck. He was feeding.

"No," I cried just as Micky flashed past me to attack the Lasombra, knocking him off my helpless friend. As Micky and Roger hit the floor in a flurry of hitting and punching, the black bonds that held Sarah and I dissipated and I went to her falling body. I caught her before she hit and I eased her the rest of the way down.

"Are you okay?" I asked as Micky and the other man continued to fight. She nodded and I could see that she was already healing the wound on her neck.

Shadows were starting to creep from the corners of the room and I knew that Roger was attempting to encase the whole room in inky blackness. We didn't have much time. Once the room was in total darkness, the Lasombra would be the only one able to see and we would all be sitting targets.

The shadow moved quickly so that soon Micky and Roger were soon ensconced in shadow. They were next to the wall where a one-way mirror afforded a view of the bar below so when I heard glass break, I knew someone had gone through it.

Thinking automatically, I followed through the blackness and when I reached the window I could see them exit out the back door Birkoff had used earlier. I jumped landing badly, but I wasn't hurt enough to stop. When I reached the door and exited I once again found myself in blackness. This shit is getting really old, I thought to myself, slowing down so that I wasn't a prime target.

I moved forward and up came against a rather large vehicle of some kind, probably a van or something. I edged around it and a few feet on the other side I came out of the blackness. The shadow was dispersing and I turned around to see that the vehicle was indeed a van. It was the piece of shit that the girl from the Inquisition drove in fact and to my disappointment she stood not far from it, stake in hand and looking at me with a pissed off expression on her face.

I didn't want to deal with this little shit right now. I was mad that the Sabbat got away again. Her presence was most unwelcome.

"I'm really not in the mood for this," I said rather harshly to her as I moved toward the building again.

"Who in the hell were those guys?" she asked. "My friends are down in there." She was still standing in an attack position, stake held in her fist close to her right ear.

"Those were the bad guys," I replied simply, stopping to eye her wearily. I didn't think it was wise to turn my back on this little heathen just yet, not until I had a chance to judge her intentions.

"Gee, I never would have guessed," she said with a disgusted look.

Enough was enough. "You know, our societies run more parallel than you think. I am sick of you people thinking that you're so much better than anyone else. There are so many of my kind that strive to make this world better."

"Look, I really don't care what good you think you can do. You're a blood sucking fiend and you should be dead." She hadn't changed her stance at all during our conversation. I could tell I was talking to a brick wall.

Before I could answer I heard a van enter the parking lot. It was one from the Chantry and many heavily armed men exited. The cavalry had arrived. When I glanced in her direction again she had moved to the door I had come out of and was walking in.

I pulled out my cell phone and punched in the number that would connect me to my sire. After two rings I heard the calm soothing voice that belonged to Antonio Moreno.

"Hello."

"He's here."

"Brenda? Is that you?" There was concern there as well as alarm. It wasn't in my nature to be so blunt with him or anyone for that matter so I knew he had to be surprised.

"Yes, my sire."

"Who's there?"

"Michael." It pulled at my heart to even say his name. How could he still do this to me after all this time? I moved to the front of the building and found a dark corner that I crouched in, needing the privacy. I was vaguely aware of someone calling my name but ignored whoever it was.

"Are you sure, childe?"

"As sure as I can be without actually seeing him. His ghoul, Birkoff is here and there are members of the Sabbat pack that keep making references to someone that sounds like him." I had managed to keep my voice even throughout my dialogue but I knew I couldn't hold it back for long. I heard my name again, closer this time but I didn't acknowledge whoever it was.

"That doesn't mean it's him, dear, just that it could be. Many things could have happened to explain this even if Michael is involved with this pack."

"You're right, Antonio, and I know that. I just can't understand what he's doing with them if he is." I cradled my head in my hand and closed my eyes.

"Some things just happen, childe." Antonio was silent for a moment and I heard my name again from the parking lot. "Brenda, who is that calling you?"

I lifted my head and peered out into the darkness. The voice came again, sounding very desperate. I knew who it was. "I don't know. I think its Rafe."

"I don't know who that is, childe, but from this end he sounds upset. I think you should answer him."

"You're right," I said into the phone before tilting it away from my mouth. "I'm here," I called out just as Rafe rounded the corner. He was seventy yards away so he didn't see me at first but when he did he headed in my direction.

"Who is this Rafe?" Antonio asked.

"He is my ghoul, sire."

"Really?" He sounded a little surprised. "When did this happen?"

"Just recently, actually. I'm worried for him."

"I take it you have been...intimate with him then?"

"Yes."

"And you are worried about what will happen when Michael finds out. Right?" Rafe had almost reached me by then, relief apparent on his face.

"Yes," I replied breathlessly.

"That is a bridge you will have to cross when you get to it, my dear. I am sure the young man would not appreciate the thought of hiding behind your skirts." I knew Antonio was right. Men didn't like it if they thought they were beholding to a woman and I knew that's how it would be with Rafe. For the second time tonight I found myself vowing to begin teaching Rafe what he needed to know to protect himself.

"Brenda," he said as he came up to where I was crouched in the corner. "Are you alright? I couldn't find you and Ethan said you went out the back door..."

I held out my hand as Antonio spoke to me, "He sounds quite desperate, childe. Perhaps I should let you go so you can calm him down." I knew my sire didn't like humans. He has been around for four hundred years and has developed the need to distance himself from them. It's an odd but endearing quality that I have learned to ignore. He is my sire after all.

"Of course, Antonio. Thank you for listening. I'll talk to you soon."

"It was good to hear from you as well, my dear. Tell me, have you heard from Christina?"

"No, I'm afraid not. Don't worry though, I'm sure she's all right. Even though she is hanging out with a Gangrel."

He chuckled and we said our good byes. I clicked off the phone and looked up to see that Rafe was standing right in front of me. When he saw that I was finished with my conversation he grabbed my hand that was still in the air warning him to silence and pulled me to my feet and into his arms.

"You scared the hell out of me," he said into my hair as I wrapped my arms around him as well.

"I'm sorry. I chased after the Lasombra when he left. Did they all get away?"

"Yes," he said as he pulled back and gave me a once over to make sure I had no hidden injuries. "I think they were all hit at least but they all got out."

"Damn. Is Micky okay?" Rafe had my head in his hands now and he was peering deeply into my eyes.

"Micky's fine." He leaned down and kissed my forehead. "Who were you talking to on the phone?"

"My sire. I needed to ask him a question."

"Is everything okay?"

"Fine. We should probably go inside, the security team is here." He nodded and turned to let me out of my hiding place. We returned to the back of the bar hand in hand to enter the building and I saw that the Inquisition girl's van was gone. Inside I saw that the bar was a total mess. It would take at least a week to clean up and replace all the tables and chairs, not to mention all the memorabilia that was now ruined.

"Micky must be fit to be tied," I said to no one in particular and Rafe squeezed my hand. Members of Caine security were removing bodies and Ethan was at the door with a really big gun, directing them.

The Inquisition members were all gone and I could see that there were many Tremere around the room, talking to the mortals who hadn't made their way outside during the firefight. "What are they doing?" Rafe asked.

"Keeping the Masquerade," I replied. Micky and Sarah were nowhere to be found and I figured they were probably upstairs. "They are using a special ability of ours to wipe away their memories of what happened here." Rafe nodded as I caught movement from the corner of my eye. I turned and saw that Bruce had arrived and a smile grew at the sight of my friend and adopted childe. His gaze found me right away and he moved to stand in front of me.

"Bruce," I said with a smile as we hugged and kissed each other's cheek. "It's good to see you. How was Nashville?"

"Good. What has happened here?" I smiled again as I stepped back and looked around, surveying the room again and all the damage done. I gave him a brief run down of the gunfight earlier and the Sabbath presence in the city as the three of us made our way upstairs to where we found Zane and other Tremere were waiting in the living room of the apartment. Micky, Sarah and Elvira were in the bedroom so we joined them to catch up on

what each other knew. Sarah hadn't had time to dress yet. She had quickly donned a terry cloth bathrobe that went to her knees.

"Oh my God," Micky breathed fifteen minutes into the conversation.

"Micky, what's wrong?" Elvira asked going to his side and putting a hand on his arm.

"The ring. It's gone." I could tell that he was mentally chastising himself. "Elvira, I'm so sorry."

"Don't worry, my childe. We knew he wanted the ring and that he would do what it took to get it. Now I know why they left so quickly." There was nothing to do now but try to find out what Akari needed the ring for and to try to stop him.

I wanted to talk to Sarah about what Roger had said concerning Michael so when she went into the bathroom to change and I joined her.

"It'd okay, Brenda. I don't need any help," she said as I closed the door behind us.

"I know," I said turning to face her. "Look, I know you've been through a lot tonight but there's something I have to ask you about."

"I figured," she stated simply, putting the clothes she had brought with her on the sink. "You want to ask me about Michael." I could see her reflection in the mirror and I understood that she didn't want to talk about it. Unfortunately Roger had said some weird things about Sarah and Michael and I wanted to know exactly what he meant.

"What did he mean, those things he said to you? Was he talking about Michael?" I could tell from her expression in the mirror that I didn't need an answer. "What happened Sarah? When did he do those things?"

"Brenda, please," she choked, stilling looking away from me. "I can't talk about this. Not now." She was too upset and I couldn't push her any further.

"Okay, Sarah. I know it must be something really horrible for you to act this way but can you promise me something? Will you tell me one day, when you're ready?" After she nodded I quietly left her alone to pull herself back together.

When I returned to the bedroom, Micky asked to speak to me. We went to the conference room and he asked me what happened in the bedroom before he got there.

With as few details as possible I told him what I knew. He must have picked up on the same references to Michael as I did because he was visibly infuriated. "I'm not sure what he was talking about," I explained. "And I asked Sarah but she was too upset to tell me. What happened between her and Michael, Micky? When did they have any contact besides that night in the park?"

Micky was standing behind a chair at the table with his hands on its back. He was silent for a few seconds and I could hear the wood of the chair creaked under the pressure of his clenched fingers. "Brenda," he began after he had composed himself. "There are things about Michael that you don't know about and right now I don't think I can talk about them."

"Micky, I don't understand. What things? Why is this coming out now?"

He pushed away from the chair and walked over to me, placing his hands on my upper arms. "Brenda, babe. Look, Sarah was asked to write a paper about the details leading up to her embrace. I will ask her if it's okay for you to read it. It has all the answers you're looking for."

"From the way you're reacting, I can tell that it's bad, Micky. If it's true, rest assured that I will take care of Michael when we find him."

"You'd better," he said and gently squeezed my arms. "I don't think he'll like it if I have to deal with him."

Rafe and I left soon after my conversation with Micky. I found out that Bruce went out on his own to look for the Sabbath and I hoped that he didn't get himself into trouble. When

we got to the car Rafe found that there was a pile of ashes near the trunk and I told him to stay back as I checked the car out for tampering. I found a note taped to the muffler that said, *Scared ya didn't I? R.C.* I crumpled the piece of paper and put it in my pocket.

We drove home in relative silence and let the dog out when we got there. As the three of us were walking along the back of the house Rafe found a cigar butt and pointed it out to me. I picked it up and realized that it was the same brand that Michael smoked. I decided it would be wise to check out the entire house and Rafe and Jorell came along. It was his first trip down to the sublevel and he was shocked to see the holding cells and the torture room, which especially seemed to throw him.

I make a circuit of the cells with the puppy in my arms and came to a rather large one in one corner of the level. I was shocked to see that it appeared as if someone has recently been in the room, the mattress was dented in.

Chapter 17: The Cell

*"Come into my dreams and then
By day I shall be well again!
For so the night will more than pay
The hopeless longing for the day."*

Matthew Arnold
"Longing"

I was terrified to enter the cell. Jorell was wiggling in my arms and licking my face, so I absently stroked his coat as thoughts flooded back to me of what happened in this room.

There had been a child in the cell once upon a time. She had been brought to Salem with Christina when they were both abducted from San Francisco. The child seemed innocent enough and Michael had been concerned that she would be traumatized by her recent turn of events.

Michael attempted to befriend the girl, Lucy, before he used his supernatural strength to bend apart the bars. He told her he was like Superman when she appeared to be in awe of his feat and she had giggled.

I blinked the thoughts from my mind as I handed the puppy to Rafe and entered the cell. How could Michael be that caring only to turn to the cold-blooded Sabbat?

I went directly to the cot and stared at the indentations in the mattress. Up close, I could tell that they were consistent to the size of an adult. Rafe was behind me - I hadn't realized he had even entered the cell, and to be honest I had hoped he wouldn't.

I bent to touch the place where the intruder had sat, deep within what was suppose to be my haven, and realized Jorell was by the cot sniffing around. He must have squirmed enough for Rafe to let him down and had come to check things out.

Then I smelled him. Michael. The cologne he always wore and the unmistakable essence that was him. Somehow he had gotten into the secret recesses of my home where I was suppose to be the safest. Jorell started barking viciously just as he had earlier when he had smelled the roses in the front hall.

My control broke then. I sat down hard on the cot with one hand resting on the place where Michael had sat as the floodgates opened and tears spilled over my lashes. I brought my other hand to my eyes in order to keep Rafe from seeing the blood. I knew I should call Micky to let him knew what happened but I didn't care. It was like every thought process just shut down and I was on autopilot.

Jorell was still barking so I didn't hear Rafe move to my side, but I felt him put his arms around my head and hold it against his body. I brought a hand up to encircle his waist, feeling his warmth fill me. I didn't deserve him.

It took me a few minutes to collect myself and when I did I saw that Rafe had dropped to his knees in front of me. I still held my hand over my eyes; I knew I had blood all over my face and I tried to discreetly wipe them away.

Rafe pulled my hand away and where I had expected to see horror at my appearance, I saw love. Simple and pure.

"Let me take away your memories," he said as I wiped the blood tears from my face. I was too stunned to say a word and his face was so close to mine. He was hypnotic. "Let me erase all those memories from your mind," he said as his mouth claimed mine.

Again I was amazed with his passion. I felt his right hand reach under my hair and around my neck to deepen the kiss while his other rested on my thigh.

Rafe's breathing quickened as our lips stroked each other's. I thought briefly of leaving the cell and continuing this in our bedroom, but his mouth was too addicting and I wanted more.

The hand on my thigh moved and I was vaguely aware of Rafe reaching into my coat and pulling first one and then the other of my Glocks out of their holsters and putting them on the floor next to the cot, never breaking the contact of our lips.

We broke apart long enough for him to remove his coat and figure eight, our eyes never leaving the other's.

When I started to remove my own jacket Rafe stopped me. "No," he said taking my hands, kissing each, and then placing them on the cot on either side of me. "Let me," was all he said as he grabbed the bottom of his turtleneck and pulled it over his head.

He unbuttoned my shirt quickly then pushed jacket, holster and shirt off my shoulders in one motion. I looked at him then and realized just how sexy he was at this point of our lovemaking. His green eyes were hazy and his mouth was set with such determination that it made me want to kiss him all the more.

When we were both completely undressed I moved to lie back on the cot and Rafe followed, settling himself on top of me.

His lovemaking is so tender. I've never been with anyone like him before, even Michael. Maybe it was because Rafe was still mortal - I don't know how long Michael had been embraced but perhaps it was something he just lost; the realization of your partners reactions and satisfactions.

We fell asleep, I'm not sure for how long, but I awoke to find Rafe chilled beside me. That is one of the hazards of this life I lead. I don't realize cold unless I'm trying to be obvious about it. For instance, if I didn't wear a heavy jacket in Massachusetts in January; I would look a teensy bit conspicuous, right?

I kissed Rafe awake and his arms tightened around me as he smiled. "I was having a wonderful dream," he said rubbing my back under the thin blanket that covered us. "I was with this beautiful siren in a dungeon and we were making love," he said coyly, looking down at me.

"And was it good?" I asked kissing his chest then layering my hands under my chin on the same spot.

"Wonderful." His voice deepened, then he shivered. "Are you cold?" he asked absently pulling the blanket tighter around us.

I grinned as his expression turned to I-don't-believe-I-asked-that. "That made sense," he said dryly.

"We should go upstairs," I said giggling as I moved to get up.

We were both dressed and on the main floor of the house about fifteen minutes later. We ended up in the living room and my eyes fell on the waist high table where I kept all my photographs of friends and family. It jogged my memory to a promise I'd made to Rafe.

"Didn't I say something about showing you my pictures?" I asked. I knew I had to tell him about Michael, his eyes practically begged me every time he was brought up. I also knew I had to be careful. Even with the blood bond, if Rafe felt that Michael came between us too much he might try to pull a stunt like the woman did who had tried to kill me three nights ago. If that happened Rafe would pay with his life. I knew what Michael was capable of and that it wouldn't bother him to kill Rafe.

"Oh yeah," Rafe replied as he moved to my side.

I picked up an 8X10 gold frame that held a picture of a beautiful brunette. She had intense green eyes and a mournful expression. "This is Christina," I said. "She is my adopted sister that lives in Las Vegas."

"Adopted sister?" There was confusion in his voice.

"Yes. My sire, Antonio," I indicated another frame that depicted a striking Spaniard. "He adopted her. She has no memory of her embrace or her life before it." I knew there was a touch of irony and sadness in my tone. Christina and I haven't spent much time together but the bond we have is incalculable – in my eyes at least.

"Is that common?" he asked.

"No. I don't think so." I had never known another Kindred to lose their memory because of the embrace. "It's possible, I guess."

"Oh, okay." He was so accepting it made my heart ache. In the short time we have had together, Rafe has unquestionably placed himself deep in the recesses of my heart. I couldn't deny I loved him, but it felt so soon.

"You know Micky and Sarah," I pointed to another frame that held my close friends. They had their arms around each other and looked so in love. I've spent many hours staring at that frame and wishing I had a tenth of the love that those two shared. And now I thought I was close.

I picked up two frames, one that held a pencil sketch of my adopted child, the other my mentor and said, "Elvira and Bruce." There was also a picture of my father on the table. Rafe seemed surprised when I told him about Jeffery Thompson.

"Where is he?" he asked. "Does he know about you?"

"He lives in Vegas," I said looking at the image of my father. "His health isn't very good. I have the best doctors taking care of him but I don't think he'll live long. And no he doesn't know about me, he's been too sick." Rafe came to me and held me but I had no more tears to shed. I had already come to terms with my father's health and knew he would be happier when his fight was over. We're both at peace with that.

The moment had come to tell him about Michael. I knew I had to make Rafe realize that Michael is a part of my past, and that I was over him even though there were days that even I didn't believe it.

I turned from the table and walked to a couch nearby. "Open the drawer," I told Rafe.

I heard the sound of wood on wood as he did so and I also heard him pick up the only thing the drawer held.

"That's Michael," I told him simply. My arms were crossed over my chest and I tried to keep my voice steady. After a minute or so, I heard Rafe replace the frame in the drawer and close it. "I meet Michael when I worked at Caesar's Palace," I began, turning to face him. I sat on the edge of the couch and began to tell my story. Before I had finished Rafe joined me on the couch and listened intently. He never asked a question but I knew he was filing away everything I did and said gauging my emotions as I told him about the man I had loved, and in a way still did. I needed to make him understand how important he had become to me and that he had nothing to fear from Michael.

"I know things have been a little odd for you," I said, taking Rafe's hand. It was so warm and strong. I knew I could trust him with anything - I just had to trust myself enough to tell him. I looked into his eyes and put on my most honest expression. He would know if I lied to him so I had to tell him the truth. "I still care for him and probably always will have some feelings for him. But he's not here Rafe, you are. I want to build something lasting with you." I swallowed hard and croaked out, "Rafe, I love you."

I could tell I had stunned him. His green eyes were huge with astonishment, and then his entire face seemed to burst with happiness. "Brenda," he said breathlessly as he pulled me into his arms. "Oh God, you've given me so much." His voice sounded shaky. "I love you, too," he said as he kissed my temple.

"You have to promise me something," I pulled back enough to look deeply in his eyes. I was prepared to use Dominate to gain his word if I had to. The oath I was about to extract from him was important to me. I cared for him so much; I couldn't bear for anything to happen to him.

"What is it, Brenda?" He was suspicious, but I needed to make sure he didn't do anything stupid if Michael showed up.

"Don't go up against him. I know what he's capable of and if you pose a threat to him he won't hesitate to kill you." My voice quivered a little. "You're not ready for him. Leave Michael to me."

He just hugged me to him again and kissed the top of my head. "You've given me so much," he repeated. "I can't promise you anything else except that I'll be careful."

"There's a lot you need to learn about being a ghoul." I knew I had to take time to at least show him the basics of Auspex, which would serve him best. And I had to feed. There was blood in the refrigerator downstairs, but I was leery of consuming vitae in front of Rafe. I raised my head from his shoulder. "And there's no time like the present to begin our training."

"Sounds great," he said.

"Let's go." I broke away and took his hand. "I need to go down to the kitchen. Do you want to come with me? I, uh - n-need to get something to eat," I said hesitantly.

"Sure." He was smiling down at me with acceptance as he squeezed my hand.

Jorell was lounging on a nearby chair and Rafe whistled to him as we left the room. The puppy jumped immediately at his master's command and followed us downstairs.

Once in the kitchen, I quickly drank four pints of blood and I was relieved to see that my required substance for survival didn't disturb Rafe. In fact, he joined me with a glass of apple juice he took from the refrigerator. As I consumed 'dinner', I thought about what I needed to show Rafe about his new existence. Auspex and his heightened physical abilities seemed like the easiest to start with.

When I was done, I rinsed out the glass I had used and took a steak knife from a drawer. "A major difference for you now will be your ability to heal yourself," I said as I approached him and took the empty juice glass from his hand and placed it on the counter. I was using my best teacher tone and I was grateful that Rafe seemed to be all ears.

"You will be able to heal most wounds almost instantaneously. The only wounds that will take time will be if someone uses something like Protean claws, or fire." When Rafe looked confused I explained, "Protean is a discipline used mostly by Clan Gangrel, although any vampire has the ability to learn as far as I know. One of the disciplines advantages is a one inch claw that extends from each finger, very useful in hand to hand combat."

"I see," Rafe said. "And you don't have that ability?"

"No, but I think Christina does. It was probably something she picked up from Luke Thomas."

He nodded and I continued.

"Wounds like that take longer to heal, like a knife wound when you were mortal." I raised the knife and took Rafe's hand, putting the tip of the blade to his palm. I looked into his eyes for any alarm and found only trust and love in the green depths. "I am going to cut your palm," I explained. "And I want you to concentrate and close the opening." Rafe stood waiting and I deftly sliced his skin open about an inch and a half. Blood seeped from the cut

and I fought the urge to lick it closed myself. I hadn't fed from him yet and didn't want him thinking I only wanted a walking happy meal.

"Concentrate," I urged and almost before I got the word out of my mouth, the cut began to close. Within thirty seconds the bleeding had stopped, the cut scabbed over and fell off, leaving fresh pink scar tissue that I knew would be gone by the next day.

"That was great," I exclaimed, smiling brightly. I dropped the knife on the counter next to his glass and wrapped my arms around his neck.

"That was probably the strangest thing that has ever happened to me," he said holding me close.

"And it's only the beginning," I laughed as I pulled away. I had to keep distance between us or we would end up making love instead of Rafe learning about his new skills. "Next on the list is your enhanced strength." As I explained the use of Potence to Rafe I knew I wasn't doing a good job of it so I started over and it seemed as if Rafe understood the concept and use of the discipline very quickly. I was so proud of the quickness he exhibited in picking up what I had to teach him. It really made my job much easier.

Next was Auspex. "Okay," I said, taking his hand again. "Let's go outside now." I knew the fastest way to help him to understand heightened senses was to throw him into a situation that would give him many things to pick out at once.

We were out the back of the house in less than a minute. Turning to Rafe, I put my arms around his waist as he wrapped his over mine. "The key to all of this is concentration. I want you to close your eyes," and he did, "and concentrate. What do you hear?"

I knew we were close enough to the ocean to pick up the rolling surf with Auspex, so if he heard that he was doing well. "There's traffic down on Park Street," he said after a minute. He was doing fine; Park Street was about five blocks away.

"What else?"

After a moment, he grinned, "Is that the ocean?" He seemed surprised and I was smiling like a proud parent.

"Yes. Very good. Anything else?"

"There's a raccoon over there." He raised his left hand and indicated some shrubbery at the edge of the property. I myself had missed that one.

"Okay, now open your eyes." Rafe looked down at me expectantly. "Can you see it?"

Rafe moved his gaze over to the source of the noise and squinted a little, "Yes." He smiled and returned back to me, "What else can I do? That's two senses, what about the others?"

He was so curious now and the prospect thrilled me. A devious thought entered my mind. "Let's see what we can do." I lowered my fangs and punctured my lower lip then kissed him.

His response was more intense. He deepened the kiss almost as soon as our lips made contact. Rafe's tongue plunged into my mouth, drawing my blood into his. His groan was guttural and purely male. It was all I could do not to let him take me right there. "Come on," I said huskily, taking his hand and leading him back inside. I had thoughts of going upstairs to our bedroom but Rafe had other ideas. As soon as the patio door was closed and locked, Rafe pulled me into the TV/REC area where we had tried to watch a movie a few nights ago and kissed me again.

My head was swimming with desire as he propelled us toward the table and chairs located in the center of the room. His hands were everywhere at once, under my sweater, in my hair, and desperately trying to remove my clothes. I was vaguely aware of chairs being knocked over in our haste to connect.

I was just as frantic to have contact with his bare skin as he was for mine. I pulled the turtleneck from his waistband and he moved back enough for me to slip it over his head. Almost simultaneously, he dragged my sweater over my head and refastened his lips to mine. His hands were at my waistband and soon my slacks joined the fast growing pile of clothing on the floor. We kissed again and I felt him boost me onto the tabletop, positioning himself to stand between my legs.

"Oh, God, I love you," I cried as the last of our clothes landed around the table and Rafe entered me. As usual, Rafe didn't fail to give me the most intense pleasure I had ever experienced. I knew that, like myself, he was still using his heightened senses and that his reactions were more extreme as well.

After we were both spent, we lay on the table together. I held Rafe's head to my chest and ran my fingers through his hair, loving the feel of its silky texture. "Well?" I prompted.

I felt him smile against my bare breast before he kissed it and raised his head to look deep in my eyes. "I think you know the answer to that question, Brenda." His voice was rough and tired. I leaned up and kissed his waiting lips and to my surprise, he reacted without hesitation. I thought he would have been wiped out but I was wrong.

"Do you want to go upstairs?" I suggested, breaking away. I knew the table wasn't very comfortable and if we continued on this path we would be there longer.

"Sure," he said with a grin and pulled the both of us to stand.

Chapter 18: Cameras

*"It's a never ending attack
Everything's a lie and that's a fact."*

Meatloaf

"Life is a Lemon and I Want My Money Back"

Later, as we lay in bed together Rafe and I talked about Malachi and why he had approached Rafe earlier at Jesters.

"He just wanted to know who I was," Rafe said, stroking my bare shoulder. "Really, Bren, it wasn't a big deal. Who is he anyway?"

My head was on his chest and when he spoke I lifted it to look down at him. "He's one of the Primogen, the Brujah in particular. Are you sure that's all he wanted? Did he say anything else?" I was feeling a little more at ease about the encounter but I had a feeling something hadn't come out yet.

Rafe's face contorted a little in thought. "He said something about being careful; that the Tremere clan didn't know how to protect their ghouls. He said to ask you about a warehouse."

I didn't want to share the story just yet about Sarah's embrace, which would have to be told soon enough. What I did have to worry about, however, was shooting my big mouth off to a Primogen. How was I going to make amends?

"I need you to do something for me tomorrow," I said, changing the subject. "I want you to get a box of nice cigars. The best you can find. I have to do a little ass kissing with Malachi when I see him again."

Rafe grinned and rose to kiss my cheek. "Of course. Whatever you want."

The phone rang and I reached over Rafe to grab the phone on the bedside table. "Hello?"

"Brenda," Elvira said from the other end.

"Yes, my Prince. I was planning to call you before the sun came up."

"Oh, why?"

"Rafe and I found a cigar butt outside the house tonight after we got here and I was wondering if you would do a Spirit's Touch on it."

Elvira was silent a moment before answering. "Why would you want a Spirit's Touch done on a cigar, childe? It seems like an odd request."

"I think it may be Michael's. It's his brand and no one around here smokes them." I hesitated slightly before saying in a rush, "I think he's been in one of the cells downstairs."

"What? Are you sure, childe? Do you want me to send someone over while you sleep?" I could tell she was concerned.

"No, no. We'll be fine. Rafe's here and I plan on doing the Wake With Mornings Freshness Ritual in case anything happens."

"Very well," she replied. "The reason I phoned was to let you know there will be a meeting tomorrow night at Jester's at ten-thirty. It will be a conclave meeting to let the other clans know of the Sabbat presence and I want you and Rafael to be there."

"Of course, my Prince. We'll get there early just in case you need extra pre-meeting security."

"Very good. If you don't want me to send anyone over just make sure Rafael has the Chantry number to call for help."

"I will."

"Good evening, childe."

"Good night." I turned off the phone and replaced it on its receiver before looking down at Rafe who was still lying on the bed. There was only about thirty minutes of night left, just enough time to perform the ritual I spoke to Elvira about.

"Everything okay?" he asked pulling me into his arms.

"Yes. The Prince wanted to let me know there is a meeting tomorrow night at Jester's that she wants us be at."

"Okay. Is everything all right?" he repeated.

I nodded my head as I rose from the bed to retrieve some feathers from a drawer across the room. "Everything's fine. I'm going to perform a ritual that will allow me to awaken if anything happens in this room during the day." I sat on the bed and looked at him intently. He was sitting up now, watching me with a serious expression on his face.

"What do you have to do?" he asked, eyeing the feathers.

"I must chant for thirty minutes and burn these feathers. I will have to immediately go to sleep after. If I don't the ritual will be useless."

He nodded his understanding and pulled the thick comforter back for me to lie down.

I got back in bed and began the ritual that would help me protect him if I needed to.

Nothing happened during the day and I awoke the next evening to find Rafe waiting on the bed. "Hi," I said as he leaned over to kiss me. The kiss soon deepened and I rolled the both of us over to lie on top of Rafe.

He laughed as his hands came up to pull my hair away from his face. I lifted my head enough to look down at him with a smile.

"The female of the species is more deadly than the male'," he chuckled as he pulled my head down for another lingering kiss and something triggered in my head.

There was something about what he'd just said that sounded familiar but I couldn't place from where. Then it hit me. The Lasombra had said that same thing last night at Jester's. I pulled back and looked down at Rafe questioningly as I remembered that that wasn't the first time I had heard that phrase, either. Rafe quoted the same line before in this very room. That could mean only one thing. The house had to be bugged.

"Hey, is everything alright?" Rafe's face was full of concern as he peered up at me. "Brenda?" he prodded when I didn't answer him.

I got up from the bed and started to search the room, making motions in his direction hoping to get my point across that the room was bugged. He appeared to have gotten the drift because he too rose from the bed and began looking as well.

A few minutes later Rafe cleared his throat from across the room and I went over to see that he had found a camera in the wall close to where the curtain hung. Fuck, I thought to myself as I grabbed Rafe's upper arm and pulled him behind me into the bathroom. On the way there, I picked up my cell phone. Visions kept going through my mind of Michael and his new friends watching Rafe and I during very intimate moments and my skin began to crawl.

Once in the bathroom I turned on the faucets in the tub and the sink and dialed Micky. He assured me everything would be fine and arrived a short time later with four members of the Caine security team, complete with all sorts of high tech devices in black leather cases. Rafe and I had both pulled on clothes before they got there and stood silently in the bedroom as the team once again looked over my house.

They ended up finding a listening device under a chair along with the camera Rafe had already found. Rafe's computer on the third floor was bugged as well as mine in the study on the basement level.

"Elvira wants you to stay at the Chantry until we have a chance to go through the house," Micky said from beside me while Rafe was upstairs copying files of the business transactions he had started the previous day.

"Of course," I said with my arms crossed in front of me. "I'll pack a few things to get us through a few nights." I felt so betrayed by Michael's complete and total violation of my home. How could he have surveillance equipment installed? Did he enjoy watching Rafe and I together? Was he now planning the way in which he was going to kill the both of us?

"Sure. I'll be downstairs waiting," Micky said as he left the room. I quickly filled a couple of suitcases with clothes and other necessities, not really paying attention to what I threw in. When Rafe returned I told him about staying at the Chantry and he phoned his sister to see if she would keep Jorell. Workers would have to completely sweep the house again and there wouldn't be anyone here to take care of the puppy.

We took Micky's car because both my Roadster and Rafe's Contour would have to be looked at to ensure they were safe to drive. We pulled up to the Chantry about a half an hour later, after dropping Jorell and all his stuff off at Auntie Samantha's.

While Rafe and one of the house ghouls brought in our luggage, I went in search of Elvira. I found her in her sitting room on the first floor. She was writing in what looked to be a journal of some kind that she promptly closed when she saw me.

"Brenda," she smiled as she indicated a seat close to her that I took. "I trust this whole mess hasn't shaken you too much."

"A little, my Prince," I admitted.

"Don't worry, childe, Micky will take care of everything. Did you bring the butt you found?"

"Yes," I said producing the item from my pocket where I had tucked it just before we had left the house. She took it and studied it for a moment before closing her eyes and enclosing her hand around it. I was silent, allowing Elvira time to concentrate on the cigar butt in hopes she could tell me it wasn't Michael that had betrayed me so completely. That wasn't to be however.

"It was him," Elvira said when she opened her eyes once more. "I saw him standing just outside the house smoking it. I also saw many others in a box next to his bed. They were a gift to him from someone close to him, someone with whom he has a strong emotional tie." My heart sank. They had to be the ones I had sent to him through Antonio only a few months before.

"He saves them for special occasions," Elvira was continuing. "There has been a great change in his life. Something that has changed the very person he is."

My head was in a spin and I couldn't reply. I was trying so hard to understand what was going on. What kind of change would make Michael want to join the Sabbat? He had everything he wanted. Money, friends, standing. I knew he could have returned to Salem at any time and be revered for the part he played in bringing down Beth and her reign of tyranny. What could these people have to offer him?

"I can tell this information has upset you, childe. Perhaps you should go up to your room until the meeting. You do still intend to go?" Elvira's voice brought me out of my thoughts and back to reality.

"O-of course, my Prince," I stammered. "I believe I will go upstairs."

"I've had adjoining rooms prepared for you and Rafael. Terry will show you upstairs."

"Thank you." I rose and left Elvira who had once again picked up her journal and was now writing in it once more. I found Terry waiting for me in the hall and she escorted me to the second floor.

Rafe was in the suite, unpacking our things and putting them away. "Hi," I said removing my coat and hanging it on the back of a chair. The room was comprised of a large king size bed, a dresser and small table and chair set. There was a black leather couch across the room from the bed and two French doors led out to a private balcony.

"Hey," he replied from the closet where he was hanging two of his jackets. "By the way, those cigars you asked for are on the bed."

I glanced and saw the box there and I could tell Rafe had chosen well. I quickly penned a note to Malachi and put the two together to take to the meeting. I wanted Micky or Elvira to check it before I gave them to Malachi so I suggested that we both showered and got dressed for the meeting. Rafe agreed and together we headed for the bathroom.

Once showered and dressed I went downstairs while Rafe finished getting ready. I found Elvira in the library putting a book away. "My Prince," I greeted her. "Can I ask your opinion on something?"

"Of course, childe. What is it?"

I held out the note I'd written and said, "Last night I did something very stupid." Her eyebrows rose in surprise and I continued. "Malachi was talking to Rafe after the clan meeting and I'm afraid jealousy got the better of me. I said some things that were disrespectful and I think Malachi would like to take a drink from Rafe because of it." I knew I was making it sound a lot simpler than it was but I was embarrassed to let Elvira know how stupid I'd been.

She took the note and quickly read it before giving me a disapproving look. "My first suggestion would be to forget the note," she said. "I also think it would be best if you merely told him something off the cuff like you thought he would enjoy the taste of the cigars better than Rafael."

I smiled at her quick solution to the problem and thanked her. Elvira brushed it off, saying that she enjoyed helping. "If you'll excuse me, there were some things I want to look over before the meeting." I nodded and after she left the room, found an old parchment with a ritual to ward things against ghouls. I also found a book about Tremere ghouls that I thought Rafe would find interesting. I took the book and parchment to the second floor of the library and sat down to study and wait for Rafe.

He didn't take long. I glance up from the parchment to see Rafe approaching with a hand behind his back. I looked at him quizzically and he just grinned like a Cheshire cat. Once in front of me, Rafe pulled his hand from behind him and revealed a single white rose that was fast becoming my favorite variety.

I took the rose from him and smiled as he leaned down to plant a kiss on my forehead. "Thank you," I said softly as I smelled the fragrant blossom.

"Anytime," he replied then sat in an empty chair next to mine.

"I thought you might find this interesting," I said, handing him the volume. He took it and was soon lost in its pages. We read together until word came that it was time to go to the conclave meeting.

There was a limo and a passenger van waiting at the front door. The limo was for the Kindred and the van for the ghouls of which there were many. Micky was among the Kindred riding over and I asked him how the security check was coming along on the house.

"It won't be done until at least nine tomorrow morning, Bren," he said. Micky went on to tell that cameras had been found in the sitting and living rooms as well as Rafe's study on the third floor. He also reported that listening devices were found in almost every room. I was once again blasted by thoughts of Michael helping the Sabbat invade my home and invade my privacy.

The ride to Jester's was uneventful and when we arrived I was once again reminded of the damage that had been inflicted on the establishment. The broken tables and chairs had been cleared away but there hadn't been time to replace any of the broken memorabilia that had once covered the walls. An area had been set up in the middle of the bar with a long table and chairs.

Members of the conclave began to file in and I was surprised to see a new face among the crowd. Well, her face wasn't exactly new, I'd seen her around town before but I didn't know her name or clan. Elvira introduced her as Rain, a member of the small Gangrel group in town.

The meeting started by eleven o'clock and I was surprised to find that the ghouls were allowed to stay with their domitors. Usually, they were made to wait elsewhere like the other night. Elvira stood at the head of the table and outlined what we knew about the Sabbat presence in the city. She stressed the need for the clans to work together to get rid of the problem.

"You talk about uniting as Kindred but your clan is divided," Arlen, the Toreador Primogen, commented. "Where is Ford?"

"Our clan mates are elsewhere, looking for information on the Sabbat. Where are the members of your clan?" Elvira countered.

"They are looking as well," he replied.

"We believe one of the members to be Michael Moorecock," Elvira said returning her attention to the rest of the group. I noticed the members of the former Prince's line were all looking at me expectantly.

Brad Van Loon, the Ventrue Primogen spoke up. "Has he contacted Miss Thompson?"

"No, he hasn't. We have conducted Spirits Touch on a few items that have led us to believe that Mr. Moorecock is with them."

"I have to doubt that your sire is on the street," Malachi blurted. "He's usually at your beck and call. Where is he tonight?"

Elvira gave the Brujah a hard look before replying, "Ford is not on the streets. He is contacting people who will aid in this situation."

"From Alden's residence?" Malachi asked and all eyes were on the Prince. "Did the two of you have a falling out?"

"Check your sources, Malachi," Elvira said coolly. "Misinformation has a tendency to get people killed."

"I just want to know how you expect us to trust you when only half your clan is here and several of them are new," Malachi countered. "Do they have the balls to help in this threat? We're not talking about a mugger in New York here." Rafe stiffened beside me as Malachi finished, "This is life and death."

"I understand your concerns," Elvira was looking around the table. "Jonah is a Sargent with the Salem police department with many years on the job experience. He has recently been 'hired' by Micky."

"What about the other one?" Malachi asked, indicating Rafe as he took a cigar from his inside jacket pocket.

"Mr. Brown has just returned to Salem from New York and Brenda has taken him on to take care of her financial obligations."

"Qualifications?" the Brujah asked. He unwrapped the cigar and ripped one end off before putting the other end in his mouth.

"Well, he was quite an asset here last evening," Elvira replied. "Mr. Brown managed to shoot and wound several of the Sabbat."

Malachi lit the cigar and toked on it before saying, "Does he know what it's like to spill blood? This isn't Central Park after all. I'll bet she hasn't even fed from him. If mortals aren't bit in a good way how do we know they will function and survive an attack? They are useful but vulnerable."

I wanted to launch out of my chair and kill that son of a bitch. He had a lot of nerve insinuating that Rafe couldn't take care of himself. So what if I hadn't fed from Rafe. What was the big deal? Michael had never fed from me unless it was a dire emergency. I didn't want him to think that all I wanted him for was a walking happy meal.

"Brenda has lived here for two years," Elvira was saying. "I have every faith in her abilities to train her ghoul or anything else. Remember those who come up against me and the role she played in taking care of them if you have any questions."

I looked to Elvira then and was relieved to see Ford approaching the table. Audrey, Deenah and Neil, other Tremere members were with him along with their ghouls and they all came to stand behind the Prince.

"Elvira Van Dorn is my Prince and I stand behind, her not against her," he said glancing over the entire group and they noticeably relaxed. It was apparent that most of them were worried because of the split in the clan even though Elvira denied its existence.

Even Malachi's demeanor had changed. "I must have been misinformed," he said nodding to Elvira. "If the Tremere stand as one then the Brujah will stand with them." The other Primogen were quick to agree and I noticed that Rain looked a little ill at ease.

Elvira noticed her discomfort as well and urged her to voice her concerns. "My clan is not used to working with the other Kindred of the city but the clan will work with the Prince," she said hesitantly.

The Prince seemed pleased with that. "Anyone with defensive or military training should be at Guilty Pleasures in one hour to discuss strategy," she said to everyone and with that the meeting was over. Everyone stood and began to gather their things to leave.

I grabbed the box of cigars from under my chair and went over to Malachi. He was already near the door and Honey was helping him with his coat. "Excuse me," I said hesitantly and he turned to me with a raised eyebrow. "I wanted to apologize for the things I said the other night. It was out of line and I hope that these will make up for it." I held out the box of cigars to him and Malachi studied it for a moment before motioning for Honey to take it. She did and opened it for him to look at the contents.

"Very nice," he commented dryly.

"I hope you will like the taste of them over Rafe," I replied cautiously.

Malachi smiled devilishly and closed the box lid. "We'll see," he said and turned to leave, Honey right behind him. His smugness unnerved me but there was really nothing I could do to him, yet.

We returned to the Chantry and Elvira asked to speak with me for a moment. Rafe said he would wait for me in our suite and I went with her to the study. Once there she took a seat behind her desk and considered me carefully.

"Weaknesses are a hard thing to live with," she began evenly. "Don't let Malachi find one. He is the type of man who would use anything to get what he wanted."

I stared at the Prince, not knowing what to say.

"I said earlier that I trusted you," she continued, "so I will not ask you if you've fed from Rafael. But know this: what Malachi said is true. We have no idea what will happen to Rafael if he is attacked without knowledge of what the kiss could be like." I knew she was right but a part of me wanted to keep that from Rafe.

"You're right, my Prince," I said, lacking a better response. "Don't worry about anything. Rafe will be prepared for whatever should arise." She dismissed me then and I went to the suite I shared with Rafe, resigned to what I had to do.

He was looking at some paperwork when I entered. "Hey," he said, dropping the papers on the table and then turned to face me. "Everything okay?"

"Fine," I replied with a smile. "What are you doing?"

"Just going over the transfer options. Do you care that we are going through New York?"

"That's fine," I said, going further into the room and taking off my jacket. I was surprised that I found myself more aware of him in every way. I glanced at his neck and thought that I saw the vein there jumping in rhythm to the beating of his heart and I turned quickly away.

"Because Boston is closer," he was saying. "Or D.C. even."

"Rafe I trust your judgement in your friend," I said a little exasperated. "If that's who you want to deal with I don't have a problem with it." I had more important things to think about, like asking you if I can feed off you.

Rafe looked at me for a moment. "Brenda, are you sure everything is okay? You seem on edge."

I crossed the room to the dresser and leaned a hip against it. There was nothing to do but dive in. "Do you remember what Malachi said earlier at the conclave meeting?" I asked, not sure where to start.

"Yeah, I meant to ask about it," he said puzzled. "What was all that about?"

"Well, I know we haven't talked about Kindred feeding from people," I said slowly.

"Yeah. What about it?" He was so trusting. It made me love him all the more.

"What Malachi was trying to get at was that it's important for ghouls to know what it's like to be bitten by someone who cares for them." My mind was racing, trying to stay calm so I didn't scare him.

"As opposed to..." he trailed off.

"As opposed to what would happen if a member of the Sabbat were to attack you." When he didn't say anything I continued, "I know we haven't talked about this before—"

"Are you trying to say that you need to bite me?" he asked coming to stand in front of me.

"Yes," I said simply. "It's really not something that I thought was done but I guess I was wrong. Michael never fed from me unless he really needed to but from what I'm gathering, other Kindred like to feed often from their ghouls at the same—"

"Brenda, you're rambling," he said, laughing as he slipped his arms around me, but he got serious again. "Will it hurt?"

"No. That's part of the reason they think I should feed from you, so you know that the difference," I replied just as serious. "I just don't want you thinking that you're a walking happy meal or anything."

He studied my face for a moment then smiled. "I don't think you can pick up guys like me and McDonalds," he said dryly. "Burger King maybe."

I smiled and looked down at his chest a minute before returning my gaze to his. "Will you let me feed from you?"

"Fear nothing and shame the devil'," he quoted softly. "Just let me know what to do."

I pulled away from him and walked to the bed, thinking I should be near it because Rafe would be weak after I fed from him. I felt Rafe come up behind me as I let my fangs drop. I took one final moment to collect myself before I turned to him and held out my hand.

He took it with so much trust in his eyes that I wanted to cry. I studied his hand for a moment then raised my eyes to once again look in his and he smiled warmly.

I pumped blood into my strength so I could catch him if he fainted afterward. Then I got an idea. "Use your Auspex," I whispered and watched as wonder crossed his features. It was the first time he'd ever seen my fangs and the affect was obvious.

I flipped his wrist over and pushed back his sleeve. Slowly, I bent over it and felt his pulse with my finger before unhurriedly licking across the space beneath his palm. I smiled when I heard the quick intake of his breath.

I bit into his soft flesh and was overcome by the sweetness of him. I fed only a little and felt Rafe go slack against me. I licked the wound closed as I lowered him to the bed then laid down beside him.

"Are you okay?" I asked, touching and kissing his face softly.

His arms came up around me and pulled me even closer. "Perfect," was all he said before capturing my lips in a searing kiss.

I had to admit I was surprised that he had that much energy but I was glad he had taken the ordeal so well. I kissed him back with all the love I felt for him. His hands found the waistband of my pants and I felt his warm fingers on my bare back as his tongue slipped into my mouth.

"Rafe," I breathed as we hurriedly pulled at each other's clothes in our haste to touch and taste. His lips seemed to be everywhere at once and I couldn't think, just feel. Our lovemaking was hot and fast and we slept briefly until I remembered that we were supposed to be at the strategy meeting.

"We have to go," I murmured with my head on Rafe's chest.

"I know," he replied. "I don't think I can move."

I lifted my head and looked down at him before I kissed his waiting lips. "Come on," I laughed as I rose and went to the closet to dress. Rafe stirred behind me and began to pull his clothes on as well.

We were only a few minutes late for the meeting at Guilty Pleasures. The Nosferatu Primogen, Gavin, was in charge and I saw Ford, Micky and Sarah among the crowd of Kindred and ghouls that had gathered on the main floor on the new club.

Rafe and I were asked to tell what we knew about the pack and we were able to pass along the description of the GTO and the members that we had identified so far. The group broke down into three smaller ones to concentrate on more specific aspects of the coming conflict. One group dealt with breaches in the Masquerade while another attempted to determine what to do with cannon fodder. Rafe and I joined the last group who would actually look for the pack.

After we were all gathered around a large table we discussed ways to increase patrols around the city to narrow down where the pack was. To my surprise, Rafe had some really good suggestions. He didn't strike me as someone with any military or strategy knowledge.

The meeting lasted until around four and we returned without hassles to the Chantry.

Chapter 19: Cenaculum Effects

*"You've been through the fires of hell
and I know you've got the ashes to prove it."*

Meatloaf

"Rock and Roll Dreams Come Through"

I awoke slowly the next night. I opened my eyes and found Rafe sitting on the couch across from me. He was dressed in khaki pants and a cream pullover and looked as if he had gone somewhere or had at least been about the house during the day. I stretched lazily under the sheet that covered me and yawned.

He rose fluidly from the couch and made his way to the bed. I sat up and brought the sheet up to cover my naked breasts, waiting for him to come to me. In his eyes, I saw love and desire and knew my own eyes reflected those same emotions. He sat on the bed when he reached it and tugged the sheet out of my grasp.

I laughed playfully and grabbed his shirt to pull him down on top of me. "Love me," I breathed just before his mouth claimed mine.

It was my favorite way to wake up. To him. To his smell and taste, to the feel of him on top of me, marking me his own.

I cried out in passion at my release and lay on top of Rafe. We had somehow switched positions during our lovemaking and I now smiled down at him. "I love you," I said planting a kiss on the end of his nose.

"Mm. I love you, too. I wish we could stay here forever." His hands were running up and down my back, rubbing muscles that never needed soothing anymore. He glistened with sweat and I couldn't help but want him all over again.

"Good idea," I said, tucking a lock of dark hair behind my ear. "But who will protect the Prince?"

"Couldn't they get along without you for a week?" Rafe's tone was serious and it surprised me. "What if we went away?"

"That sounds great. Maybe aft-" the phone rang and interrupted my thought.

Micky didn't wait for me to say hello, "Brenda?"

"Hi. What's up?"

"I was wondering if you were still here, I expected you to be up an hour ago. Is everything alright?"

"I'm okay. Just slow to getting my engines started. What's up?" Rafe's hands moved down to cup my buttocks and squeeze gently. I was shocked and looked down at him incredulously but he only smiled and squeezed again. I slapped his chest and he laughed silently but removed his hands, much to my dismay and gratitude.

"Zane has been trying to get into the computer system at St. Stephen's, but it's a no go. Can Rafe get with his contact and see what's up?"

I looked at Rafe, "Micky wants to know if you can make contact with Aislynn. Zane couldn't get into the computer."

"I can try, but I'm not sure how far I can get. I dated her in high school, but that was years ago." He thought a moment before adding, "And I don't like the idea of bringing you around her, that would only be asking for trouble."

"Did you hear that?" I asked into the phone.

"Yeah. Jesus, it sounds as if you're right on top of him Brenda. Turn down the sound on your phone. I have to admit that I don't like the idea of you being put in harms way either. Maybe Jax or one of the other ghouls could go with Rafe. Maybe to The Coven?"

I was horrified and thanked God he didn't give me a chance to respond. He probably knew that I was sitting on top of Rafe and was deliberately teasing me. "Okay," I breathed. Then to Rafe, "The Coven?"

"You know, the coffee house down on Jones Street?"

"I know, Micky," I said into the telephone. "I was talking to Rafe." Then to him I asked, "Do you want to have someone else go with you? Jax?"

"Yeah, I guess," he said with a shrug.

I leaned down to kiss his waiting lips then told Micky to give him twenty minutes and he would be down.

"What can we do in twenty minutes?" Rafe asked after I hung up the phone.

"Not enough for me." I kissed him again then handed him the phone. He called Aislynn and arranged to meet her at The Coven in forty-five minutes. Then he showered and redressed while I told him what kind of information we were looking for. I walked him to the door of our suite and told him to be careful and not to give himself away. "Come back to me," I said forcefully and kissed him soundly.

"Always."

I love you, I thought to myself as he closed the door behind him.

I dressed myself and went downstairs to the library to attempt to study while I waited. I found a book on Sabbat history and sat at a table that allowed me to look out over the front of the Chantry. I managed to learn a few interesting things about them and pocketed the information in the back of my brain. My thoughts were on Rafe but I knew that facts like Sabbat packs used what is called a Vinculum, a form of blood bond that links all members of the pack to each other, were important. I also found a passage that dealt with Clan Tzimisce and a discipline called Vicissitude. Tzimisce are the priests in Sabbat packs and use this discipline to manipulate flesh. It was some very intense stuff.

One important fact I found told about a Sabbat habit called cannon fodder. I already knew that they embraced many ordinary people when they were trying to take over a city to use as bait or walls for protection, but there were some case studies listed over several pages in the volume I was reading.

I also learned about fire walking. It is a trance-like state, which allows the user to walk across hot coals and leap through open flames, thus rendering them able to avoid being burned or frenzied from contact with the fire.

"Hi, Brenda." Startled, I looked up to see Sarah standing there. I had been dividing my time between studying the book and keeping an eye out for Rafe and hadn't heard her come in.

"Hey Sarah. How are you?" Without realizing, I glanced out the window again. I thought I saw headlights.

"Are you expecting someone?" Sarah asked as she took a seat next to me at the table.

"Rafe went out to try to get some information from a contact with the Cenaculum about the hacker they are bringing in. I'm just waiting for him to get back." Goosebumps sprang up on my arms and neck for no reason at all and I absently rubbed them as I looked at Sarah, she seemed a little distracted and confused.

"What are you talking about, Brenda?"

I felt a little awkward. Micky had never asked me not to say anything to Sarah about what was going on in reference to the Cenaculum, but I got the distinct feeling I was telling her things Micky wanted to shelter her from. I thought I saw something move in the corner of my eye, but when I turned my head, there was nothing there. I brought my attention back to

Sarah and put myself in her shoes and realized that she was a grown woman and shouldn't be treated like a child.

"I guess they're bringing someone in from Edinburgh to get in the computer. Zane tried from here but had no luck."

"Who is Rafe meeting with?" Sarah was looking at the book I was reading to see what it was.

"Aislynn. They dated in high school I think."

Sarah seemed to be taken aback. "Aislynn?" She appeared dazed and just as I was about to ask her if she was all right I heard a car pull up. I looked out the window and saw Rafe, Jax and Sam, two of the house ghouls, exit a vehicle in the front of the house. I was elated that they appeared intact. There wasn't any blood or torn clothing. I breathed a sign of relief. There was something there again, in the corner of my eye but it was gone when I turned my head.

"Sarah, are you okay?" I asked when I looked back. She looked distracted.

"I'm fine," she replied. I tried to see her aura, but I must have been distracted by Rafe's return and couldn't read her. "Do you know where they were going to meet her?"

"The Coven." I stated simply.

I could now hear the three of them enter the foyer and it sounded as if some of them had been drinking. Their footsteps were heavy and their voices slurred. One of them, I think it was Rafe, shushed the other two and I heard steps go off toward the back of the house while a single set seemed to come toward the library.

"The Coven?" Sarah asked distracted.

"Yes. Isn't that a coffeehouse? He was testing the waters, I guess."

"Didn't Zane try to get into them from here? The computers used to be on modems."

I saw Rafe standing in the doorway of the library. "He did try, Sarah, I just told you that. Are you sure you're okay? Was Rafe in danger?" I was confused and upset. If Rafe had been put in some kind danger that I wasn't told about, in fact it had been made a point that I was not even there to protect him, I would not be a happy camper. Rafe was heading our way with a small smile on his face.

Sarah jumped a little as if she was finally participating in the conversation, finally putting me at ease. "No, Brenda. I'm sure everything was safe." She waved her hand as if she were brushing away a fly and sighed. "I'm sorry, I'm just not paying attention tonight. I think I'll go up to our suite." She stood and smoothed her skirt, preparing to depart. Rafe reached us then and bent to kiss my cheek.

"Okay, Sarah. I'll talk to you later." I was hesitant but figured that Sarah was fine. She was probably thinking about her life in the Cenaculum after I threw the subject in her face. From what I knew, Micky usually didn't talk about the Inquisition House in front of Sarah, but I don't think it's because he's trying to hide anything from her. He was sparring her from something.

As she walked away, Rafe glanced over his shoulder to make sure Sarah wasn't looking and leaned down to kiss me again, this time on the mouth. I kissed him back but made it brief. Sarah's reaction to the mention of Aislynn made me nervous. "How did everything go?" I asked when I pulled back.

"Just fine," he replied smiling again. "Aislynn really liked Jax after I convinced her he wasn't my date. They started talking about work and computers and stuff." He moved to sit down in the chair Sarah had occupied moments earlier, but he pulled it closer.

"Did you find out anything?" I turned in my chair to face him, making our knees touch.

"The hacker is supposed to be here on Wednesday and she will go over the files then. Jax tried to get Aislynn to go out with him, but apparently there is some rule about dating outside the Cenaculum. She said one of them had done it anyway a few years ago, and a bunch of vamps attacked her outside of Alec's shop. What do you know about that?"

"That was Sarah," I said recalling the chain of events that led to Sarah's embrace. "She was a member of the Cenaculum when she met Micky."

Rafe glanced to the doorway where Sarah exited. "Really? How'd she end up...?"

"She was attacked when her brother, who was utterly off his rocker, wanted to embrace her so they could be together forever. She had already decided to let Elvira embrace her, and she was grabbed in front of your uncle's shop. We tracked her attackers down to a warehouse on the West Side. She had already been bled to the point of death and Micky had to embrace her himself or she would have died." Thinking about those events sent a shiver up my spine. I knew Rafe could tell when I was lying and I hoped he wasn't looking for a lie in my words. There was no way I could tell him the whole story. Sarah was Tremere, that was true, but she had also ingested Brujah blood during her embrace, which made her half Brujah. It is very rare to have two bloodlines and I didn't understand how this could have happened, but there she was, a Blood Walk had proved it.

"Wow," Rafe breathed. "That must have been harsh. I hope you got the brother?" Goosebumps rose on my arms again and I rubbed them, trying to figure out what was causing these reactions. I didn't get cold and normally I didn't see something from the corner of my eye that turned out not to be there.

"Yeah, we did. Were you followed?" I saw something again that was gone when I looked in that direction. I was getting unnerved.

"No," he said, frowning. "Jax drove around for a while to be sure. What's wrong?"

"I'm not sure, but I have a bad feeling." I rose and carefully began looking around the room. "Go find Micky. I'm going to have a look around."

"Okay." He rose as well with a worried look in my direction, then shivered and scanned the room cautiously.

I realized that Rafe was picking up on something I wasn't. I laid a hand on his arm while loosening my Glock from its holster with the other. I scanned the room, looking for anything out of the ordinary. I saw nothing.

I realized that Rafe was in no condition to find Micky; he was shaking almost uncontrollably and was only vaguely aware of my presence. I went to the house phone and dialed Micky's extension. "I'm sorry to interrupt," I said when he answered. "There's something up I think. I got a weird feeling. Where is Elvira?"

"She's in her study, what's up?" I had his full attention.

"I was talking to Sarah about the Cenaculum house and I got a weird chill. Rafe has it as well, only stronger. It won't go away. Do you know if they know about the house?"

"Jesus," he breathed, then in a demanding voice, "is Sarah still there with you?"

"No. She was on her way back to your suite. What's going on?"

"I'll be right down. Call Elvira, she's wanted to see this. If Sarah comes back, make her stay there." Then he hung up.

I dialed the phone again, this time to Elvira's private study. It only rang twice before she answered crisply. "What is it?" I was surprised. It didn't sound like the Prince. I thought whatever was going on in the house was affecting her as well.

"Elvira? Are you okay?"

After a slight pause she answered, "I'm fine, Brenda, what can I do for you?" She was making an effort to hide whatever it was that had distracted her.

"Micky asked me to find you. There may be a problem in the library. Do you need me to come to you?" Rafe was still shaking so I tried to pull him to my side. His movements were stiff and he had his arms still crossed in front of him.

"No, Brenda that's not necessary. What kind of problem?" She seemed a bit surprised.

"There's a chill in the room that shouldn't be here. Micky wanted you to join us."

"Really?" It was as if I had her attention for the first time. "I'll be right there," and she hung up abruptly.

I replaced the handset to its cradle and turned to Rafe. "Are you okay?" I asked. He was still shaking but seemed coherent.

"I-I'm fine, B-Brenda," he replied, trying to smile through chattering teeth. "What's going on?"

"Are you cold? Talk to me. Tell me what's happening to you." My hands were shivering a little but it didn't compare to the tremors that rocked Rafe.

"Don't you see it?" he asked. I looked around, but only caught something out of the corner of my eye that I saw earlier with Sarah. Elvira was entering the room now with Micky a few feet behind her. Micky held a silver tray but I couldn't tell what was on it.

"Rafe," I said taking his head in my hands, making him look at me, "tell me what you see."

"It's a man," he said quietly, averting his eyes to look over at the fireplace. "He's here, but he's not. When I first got in here, he was next to Sarah, but she waved him away like a fly and he came back to us." I then remembered Sarah doing just that but I had assumed there might have been a fly or that maybe she was gesturing to something I said.

"What does he look like?"

"He's... not as tall as me, blond hair." Rafe's brow furrowed a little, "And he's pissed that I can see him."

I glanced up to see that Micky and Elvira were almost to where Rafe and I stood. "I think he's a ghost of some kind."

Micky must have heard my last statement because he turned his head to Elvira, "I told you."

"Where?" Elvira demanded as she stopped next to me.

"I can't see him," I reported to her then turned my attention to Rafe. "Where is he, love?"

His shaking hadn't let up at all. I held his upper arms in my hands and I began to worriedly massage them in an effort to help keep his attention. "Over there," he indicated toward the fireplace. Elvira moved without hesitation to the fireplace, Micky still at her side. As they neared it, a glass vase fell with a loud crash to the floor.

The fireplace had my full attention now. I turned and positioned Rafe behind me. Hopefully if anything started flying, it would strike me first.

"What do we do?" My question fell on deaf ears as Elvira began chanting in what sounded like Latin, a language I didn't know. I realized that I couldn't be of any help in the situation, but I could learn. I felt Rafe's arms slip around my waist as he tried to pull me away. "No," I put my hands over his where they were linked at my navel. "Watch and learn." My eyes never left the scene, I could remember what Elvira was saying but I would have to check the translations later. Micky handed Elvira a wand from the tray then took up a hand full of herbs and threw it toward the fireplace as a small figurine of a shepherd crashed to the floor.

"If I'm in danger from him, get me out of the way. Otherwise, we need this knowledge," I whispered to Rafe as Micky handed Elvira more ritual items from the tray. He

stopped pulling at me but didn't loosen his hold around my middle. He was still shaking as well, but not as bad as before.

I heard a faint but definitely unnatural scream from next to the fireplace that didn't deter Micky or Elvira in the least. The ritual continued and five minutes later, another scream arose, this time louder. Micky and Elvira took a step back as everything that remained on the mantle was cleared to a ruined heap on the floor. A woman's scream echoed from the second floor of the library, but I didn't look up to see who it was.

Micky looked, however, and I saw the effort it took for him to return his attention to the task and hand Elvira a dagger as she chanted louder. She took it and thrust the air, receiving two screams in return, one from the fireplace and the other from the woman upstairs. Elvira swooned then her knees buckled underneath her. Micky caught her before she landed on the floor as Rafe pulled me quickly to the right. One of the windows to our left crashed outward then all was quiet.

I glanced to the second floor and saw Sarah leaning over the rail with blood tears streaming down her pale cheeks. Micky helped Elvira to the nearest chair and after he was assured she was all right, he headed toward the stairs at a dead run. I broke away from Rafe to go to Elvira's side, "Are you okay? Can I get you anything?"

"I'm fine, childe," she said, her voice trembling slightly. "It is a difficult ritual and must be performed quickly. It has been years since I had to do it, and F-Ford assisted me then." She looked very tired and drained; I thought maybe she needed blood. There wasn't a refrigeration unit in this room so I picked up the house phone and asked Jax to bring a few pints and get someone over to replace the window.

Rafe was leaning against a bookcase, catching his breath. I returned to his side and wrapped my arms around his waist. "My God, what was that?" I asked.

"He looked like one of the guys in a picture that Aislynn showed us tonight. Was that a ghost?" Rafe asked as Jax entered with a glass decanter of blood and a crystal goblet on a tray.

"It must have been. What picture?"

"She showed us a picture of a bunch of people she used to work with. There was a girl in it that looked like Sarah, but I didn't connect the two till you said she used to be an Inquisitor. Zane was in it, too, and Jax said that he was one as well until Elvira... changed him."

"That's true. That's why he was the one who tried to hack into their computer. What did this guy look like?"

"Not quite as tall as I am, blond hair, gray eyes, I think. He might have been good looking if he hadn't been so pissed."

"Did he seem to be hurt in any way?"

Rafe's brow creased as he looked down at me, "I thought you said you couldn't see him?"

"I couldn't. But a lot of people died the night they kidnapped Elvira. If he is one of them, he probably died that night."

"They kidnapped Elvira?"

"Unfortunately, yes. We had to get her out." I turned my head to watch the woman I would give my life for. She was sitting quietly, sipping from a glass of blood and recuperating her strength. I said thoughtfully, "We couldn't let them kill her."

Rafe's reply was rueful, "That would have been chaos. 'It is better to have a lion at the head of an army of sheep than have a sheep at the head of an army of loins.'"

I smiled slightly and returned my gaze to his. I love you, I mouthed.

Rafe glanced quickly around the room then dropped a quick kiss to my lips.

If it were possible for Elvira's color to return, it did. She was now sitting straight in the chair she occupied and held the glass of vitae with only one hand. The fact that Rafe and Jax were in the room must have reminded her of their mission of the evening. "What did you find out?" she asked in her most formal tone.

Jax reported that he thought Aislynn liked him, but the society had strict rules that wouldn't allow her to date him. He also informed her that the female hacker would arrive Wednesday.

"Did you get the name of the woman or any other details about when she comes in?" Elvira asked.

"Her name is Bronwyn and she is due to arrive in Boston at 2:45 PM. Eliza is suppose to pick her up and bring her back to St. Stephens," Jax replied.

"Who is this Eliza?" Elvira asked thoughtfully. "I haven't heard of her before."

"She's new," Rafe replied respectfully. "Aislynn isn't sure she trusts her, but she said she seemed to have good instincts." Rafe's comment sparked an idea that this Eliza may be our friend in the van that kept popping up all over town. I had already had the suspicion that she was a hunter so my assumption made sense.

"I wonder if it's that girl that was at Jester's the other night?" I thought out loud.

"What are you talking about?" Rafe turned to me.

"Remember the van?"

"At the army surplus?"

"Yes. She was at Jester's during the shoot out with the others from the Cenaculum."

Elvira interrupted, "You've talked to this girl and she didn't try to kill you?"

"I'm not sure why she didn't," I replied. "She had every opportunity."

Elvira thought for a moment then stood and handed the empty glass to Jax. She instructed him to call Aislynn and see what information he could get from her then left the room. Rafe was still a little spooked by the recent chain of events so we left a few minutes later.

There was a large manila envelope on the table in our suite with my name written on it. After a moment I recognized Sarah's neat script and realized this must be the story Micky had said he would ask her if I could read.

Rafe crossed the room and hung his coat in the closet. "What's that?" he asked closing the closet door.

I slipped the thick packet of paper out of the envelope to find my original idea of it's contents were right. "It's Sarah's story." I glanced up at him. "The clan asked her to detail the events of her life and this is it." I held up the papers.

"Really?" His brows lifted in surprise. "I thought you already knew how she became embraced?"

"I do but there's a few details I don't know about. They're touchy for Sarah to talk about." I looked at the papers again and wondered what answers I would find in them. "I think it's easier for her to have me read this."

"I see. Well, why don't you go ahead and check it out then. There's some paperwork I need to go over." He thumbed the air in the direction of the adjoining room where he'd put his laptop and briefcase.

"Okay," I replied as he disappeared into the other room. I settled into the story, intending to flip through it until I reached the part about Michael.

I was vaguely aware of Rafe returning to the room or of him sitting on the couch, leaving me alone at the table.

I found the section sixteen pages into the document. I didn't know that Sarah had been captured and brought back to the house much less the fact that Michael had fed from her. She'd been thrown into one of the dungeon cells and Michael had visited her there. He did things to her I would never thought to credit him with. He had humiliated her beyond normal bounds and now I understood Micky and Sarah's dislike of him.

To my horror Michael had held her to the wall in much the same way Roger had two nights ago. He had also fed from her and said things that were totally inappropriate. I didn't know what to think.

Chapter 20: More Ghosts from the Past

"Can I burn these mazes I grow?

Can I? I don't think so."

K's Choice

"Virgin State of Mind"

I noticed when Rafe and I entered David's Bar that Blackie and Noah, two Brujah from the city were sitting at a table on one side of the room and a Gangrel named Ethan was with a woman on the other side. We took seats at the end of the bar and ordered a beer for me, and a Coke for Rafe. As the bartender got our drinks I took a moment to have a look around the place. There weren't many others here but for some reason I took special notice of a couple occupying a table not far from where Rafe and I sat.

The woman was looking at me with interest and it took me a minute to realize that I recognized her from when I first came to Salem two years ago. Early that evening before we went to the house I had seen a poster saying that a girl was missing and to contact her brother in Flint, Michigan. Her name was Teresa Norris and after Michael had killed Beth I told Elvira about seeing the poster.

Christina had desperately needed to feed and I had taken her to the third floor of the mansion where all the ghouls in the house had been gathered. We saw the girl there among the other ghouls. Based on Beth's interaction with Antonio, Michael and myself, I hadn't thought that Teresa had been treated very well under Beth's command and was probably there against her will.

Elvira looked into the situation and Jason Kline eventually returned Teresa to her home, but only after Michael had used Dominate to clear her memories. I motioned the bartender over and told him I wanted to buy a round of drinks for the pair.

"No problem," he said.

As I sat there thinking of her, I realized that Teresa was looking at me in surprise, as if she recognized me, as well. The bartender had just delivered their drinks and was now returning behind the bar. That's ridiculous, I thought to myself. There is no way she could know who I am. Michael and Antonio had seen to that. I also wondered why she was back in Salem. Maybe her unconscious mind drew her back to a city that held memories she no longer remembered. I didn't want to appear as if I were staring and therefore draw attention to myself so I diverted my gaze to Rafe and put my hand to my lips in an effort to keep anyone from reading my them while I asked, "How's your Coke?"

"It's a Coke, Brenda. You know, it tastes like Coke." He replied sarcastically.

"Oh, ok." I was trying to keep an eye on Teresa and not make it look obvious.

Rafe reached over to run a hand through my hair resting on my arm and looked intently at me. It was apparent that he loved the low cut black dress I was wearing by the way he kept looking at my exposed cleavage. I tried to ignore Teresa and her companion, but I noticed they were whispering and that she still looked in my direction from time to time. I tried to hear what they were saying but it was no use. I was in the dark.

"Another drink?" the bartender asked. I hadn't even heard him approach and gave a little start. Rafe took my hand and gave me a strange look.

"Another Coke, please," he said with a glance at the man behind the counter.

"N-Nothing, thank you," I replied. I glanced again to the couple's table and was horrified to see the man walking toward Rafe and I, while Teresa stayed at the table. His swagger said that he wasn't necessarily cocky but that he was definitely assured of himself.

When he reached us he said, "I'd like to thank you for the drink."

"Oh, no problem," I said nonchalantly. "Your companion, ah, girlfriend...?"

"Sister." He confirmed.

"Sister, sorry. She appeared to be kind of down. You know, sometimes a kind gesture from a stranger can help to perk someone up."

"That's kind of you. There are many who would do something like that with an ulterior motive in mind." He eyed me intently.

"Yeah, there are," I said matter-of-factly. This guy had no clue.

"I'm Devin Norris," he said holding out his hand. "Can I ask your name?"

"Oh, of course. My name is Brenda." I took his hand firmly.

"Good to met you Brenda. And this is?"

"Oh, this is Rafael," I said not wanting to give away too much information. This guy was way too nosey.

"Rafael. No last name?"

"Rafael Brown," Rafe chimed in.

He nodded his head to him, "Mr. Brown."

Rafael looked him up and down and said, "Rafael, please."

The stranger's gaze returned to me again, "Miss..."

"Mrs."

"Mrs? Mrs. Brown?"

"Um-hmm." I held my glass in my left hand to conceal my lack of a ring.

"We're kind of new in town," he said glancing back at his sister. "We just got in a couple of nights ago and we're checking out the nightlife. This is a little seedier then we expected when we pulled in, but... we're kind of trying to get a feel for the place."

I laugh a little, "That's fine. You're not the only one. Rafael and I haven't been here before and we are checking things out, too."

"Can you recommend any other places in town?"

"Well, is there any type of entertainment you enjoy?" I asked, not wanting to suggest any Kindred hangouts so I was thinking quickly to come up with other alternatives. We didn't exactly travel in the same circles, this mortal and I.

"Not specifically, we're just trying to get the lay of the land. My sister visited here a few years ago and she doesn't remember where some places are and others have closed," he said with a shrug. He was trying to be nonchalant but I suspected that he was digging for something.

"Well, there's The Coven and Borders," I said counting on my fingers. "They make great coffee and The Coven is a nice place to hang out. And there's always neat little places like the wax museum. Are you just visiting or are you planning on moving here?"

"I've taken some leave from work and we came to Salem to check it out," he replied. "Teresa remembered some things she liked about the town so we came to see if it was worth moving out here."

"Oh. Yes this is a lovely little town."

"Yeah. There's quite a witchy atmosphere I must admit." His tone was dry. "They really take the Salem thing to the nines. Do you live here?"

"Yes." Was he writing a book or something? Geez, I felt is if the Viet Kong were putting me to the question.

"Have you lived here long?" he asked.

"A few years," I replied, my tone becoming less and less friendly. Maybe he would take the hint and scam.

"Two years? Three?" he asked, obviously not picking up on my lack of concern. God he's nosey, I thought to myself again. He sounds like a cop. Jason's Intel on this guy was right on. Devin Norris was a Flint City police officer.

"Almost three I think."

"Oh, yeah. I thought that was how long because Teresa thought she remembered seeing you when she was here before."

"Oh, really?" Where is this going? I thought to myself. Does this girl know I'm Kindred? Obviously, the memory alterations Michael had performed on her hadn't totally worked, but how of it much had?

"Yeah, at a friend's house she said." He looked as if he had a cat in a bag. He was actually smirking!

"Oh, wow," I said shrugging my shoulders and trying to look stupid. "Either she's mistaken or I don't remember her."

"Really," he was all cop in demeanor. "'Cause she seems so sure."

"I guess anything is possible, three years is a long time." I hoped I sounded flip enough. If he kept this up he would be putting not only his life in danger but his sister's as well. I didn't want that but the Masquerade had to be upheld.

"Yeah it is. She said she remembered you and a blonde man, kind of tall, like that guy from the one movie with the bugs." That was true, I had seen a movie called Starship Troopers and Michael did look a little like the star. Maybe that guy had sparked memories in Teresa.

"Oh, really? Bugs? I don't like bugs," I said, trying to act grossed out. What in the hell is this guy getting at anyway?

"She remembers him quite distinctly and wants to look him up again." Devon shrugged his shoulders. "They had a long conversation and Teresa is interested in continuing it."

"Oh, really. I hope she finds him, whoever he is." Thanks for leaving me in another mess, Michael, I thought to myself.

"Rafael," Devin said switching the interrogation to him. "Have you lived here long?"

Rafe adjusted his position on the stool to fully face Devin and said, "I grew up here but I've lived in New York for a while," he responded like a student in Catechism. "This is the first time I've really been back in four or five years." He looked at me fondly and continued, "I met Brenda soon after I returned and we fell for each other instantly. It was love at first sight." I made sure to look at him like a devoted wife.

Officer Devin took a moment to consider his next question as Rafe grabbed my hand and squeezed it. He gestured toward the door and I followed his gaze to see a pretty skuzzy looking guy standing just inside the door of the bar. I was sure I'd seen him around town before but I couldn't place where.

The guy took a few steps in and by his lack of coordination I thought he was either drunk or high, or both. It was almost as if he had little to no control over his body. His arms hung awkwardly at his sides and his legs were stiff one second and almost buckled under him the next.

I did an aura perception on him and found that he was human though the aura was slightly pale, marking that he might have been a ghoul at some point in the past. Colors swirled around him, telling me he was confused, bitter, and angry. He was also depressed and hateful about something. He was obsessed, almost psychotic, too. The longer I looked at him the worse the shifting became. His obsession increased while love and envy began to come into play. He reminded me of someone looking for a person they really cared for.

The man stumbled across floor in our direction. I tried to stay calm but there was something about him that made me uneasy. Rafe continued to chat with our bloodhound but still managed to keep an eye on our new arrival. I must have stiffened a little because Rafe squeezed my hand again reassuringly.

Devin must have seen the man, too. His stance changed to that of someone ready for a fight. Impressive, I thought to myself.

With everyone's attention moving toward the odd man by the door, Rafe put his hand inside his jacket to pull a gun but didn't actually draw one.

I cursed myself for wearing a dress and not bringing a purse, which left me weaponless. Then I remembered that Rafe had a pair of Glocks and that I could take one of his if I needed. I wiggled forward on my stool in case I needed to stand quickly and used Auspex to look for anything else out of ordinary. But I detected nothing. The man advanced further into the bar on his unsteady limbs. He hadn't yet spoken to anyone or made any kind of response that he even noticed that he had walked into a busy bar.

About the time the man reached the table where Teresa now sat alone a big biker with a heavy beard and stringy hair that was sitting at another table seemed to recognize the man. The biker stood and grabbed him by the arm and said, "What the hell are you doing here? I told you never to come in here."

The man was oblivious to the biker. His eyes finally fell on me and recognition filled his face. He raised a hand to me almost in a pleading gesture of someone looking for salvation. The biker pulled on his arm, trying to get his attention, and continued, "Man I told you never to come in here. You're not even supposed to be out." They were only about ten to fifteen feet away from us so I could have heard them even without using Auspex.

The man looked from me to the biker and said desperately, "I had to. I had to come." His eyes had an incredibly lost look about them.

"What? We've got to get you out of here." He turned them both around and started for the door. The man looked at me again and tried to pull away from the big biker. I attempted to read the larger man's aura but I could only tell he was human.

"Let me go." The man was really trying to get away now. "No, I have to see her. I have to talk to her." He managed to get a hand loose and held it out to me.

"No way man. You're out of here or it's my ass. I have to get you back to the house." I racked my brain trying to remember where I had seen this guy but I got nowhere.

By now it was obvious to me that the man wanted to speak to me about something so I stood and asked, "Did you want to talk to me?"

They were almost to the door and the man called out, "Brenda," just as the biker pulled him out the door.

I reached inside my dress where I had stuffed some cash before we left the house and toss a twenty on the bar. "Excuse me," I said to Devin. "I gotta find out what's going on." Then to Rafe, "Let's go see what this is about."

I nearly ran out of the bar and found the biker trying to shove the smaller man into a car. The man was fighting the biker but not getting anywhere. He saw me exit the building and called out breathlessly, "Brenda! No, I have to talk to her. Stop!" The car wasn't running yet, but I could see another guy on driver's side trying to help get the man in.

I realized the biker and his friend weren't going to let me talk to the man so I reach into Rafe's jacket and pull out one of his Glocks. "What's going on?" he asked. "Who is this guy?"

"I don't know, but he wants to talk to me."

"And we're stopping them from taking him?"

"Yes," was all I said and that was all the answer Rafe needed. He pulled his other gun and watched me for my next move. "Freeze," I yelled, leveling the gun in their direction.

The biker had him in the car by now and was getting in back seat himself. The would be driver of the vehicle glanced at me and registered the fact that I had a gun in my hand and dove for cover. I advanced toward the car not worried that a police officer would show up any time soon because they didn't patrol this area often.

"Are you a cop?" I heard from behind me. I turned slightly and saw that Devon had followed us outside and was now trying to question me at a very lousy time.

"No, but sometimes it pays to act like one," I replied over my shoulder as I continued forward. The need to know what this man wanted to talk to me about became insistent.

"Do you have a license for that thing?" This cop was beginning to get on my nerves.

"Of course, I do." That had all been arranged for when I bought the guns for Rafe so I knew I had nothing to worry about legally.

I put the mortal's presence out of my mind. There were more important things to think about. I knew Rafe was behind me and would back up anything I did. When I reached the back door where the biker had shoved the man in, I grabbed the handle and threw it open. The opposite door opened in the same instant and the man stumbled out the other side of the vehicle. Apparently he had finally gotten free of the biker. I motioned to Rafe to go around the car to help the man and he went without question. The car started as the biker reached for his elusive prey. "You son-of-a-bitch, get back in here or it's my ass," he grunted.

I brought the gun up for a killing shot and asked, "And to whom would you lose it to?"

"Oh, shit," he roared when he turned and saw the gun in my hand. "Carlos, take off." The biker reached over to pull the door shut where the man had escaped and I pulled back just as the car lurched forward. I tried to get the license plate number but the light bulb was either burnt out or unscrewed. I saw Rafe on his knees over the man who was now lying on the ground.

"Are you okay?" Rafe was asking him but the man was fighting him.

"Leave me the fuck alone," he raved but most of the blows were harmless and Rafe ducked them with no trouble. "Brenda," he cried, looking for me.

I went over and knelt beside him. At first he didn't realize my presence and fought me as well. "Who are you?" I asked, grabbing his face in my hands as I performed another aura perception. I again saw he was human but that he may have been a ghoul before. As I looked at him a sudden clarity came over him. He was calm. Desire and happiness washed over him along with love and again obsession. "Who are you?" I repeated.

Chapter 21: Who Are You?

*“Can’t stop loving
Can’t stop what is on its way
And I see it coming and it’s on its way”*

*Tori Amos
“Bells for Her”*

“God, Brenda. Don’t you know me?” His voice was full of sorrow as he touched my face tenderly. There was something about his manner that I recognized but I couldn’t be sure what it was. From behind me I heard Devon say, “Ah, Mrs. Brown?”

“Yeah?” I really couldn’t handle much more of this nosey cop. I was also getting frustrated because I didn’t know who this guy was.

“I think you need to look,” he said. I turned and saw that Roger Campbell had grabbed Rafe from behind and had an arm around his neck. Roger had no visible weapons and I noticed that a shadow enveloped Rafe’s gun hand and mouth. He looked frightened.

I pumped my preternatural blood into dexterity and strength to make me more agile if I needed, but I didn’t stand. “And what do you want?” I asked coldly. “Is this one of your lackeys, one of your little playthings?”

“Well,” he drawled smoothly and tilted his head. “He’s one of my playthings.” Then to the man, “Bradley, you’ve been a bad boy.”

He tensed beneath me when the Lasombra spoke and he tried to shrink away from me, but I had a tight hold on his face and he wasn’t going anywhere. I turned back to him and said, “Don’t worry, pet.” I held his face so that he looked only at me. I knew that the Lasombra clan knew Dominate and I didn’t want to give him the chance to turn the guy away from me before I knew what was going on.

“You have to keep me away from him,” he begged. “You don’t know what he’s done.”

“Oh, I can imagine,” I said reassuringly, rubbing my thumb across one of his eyebrows soothingly.

“I don’t think you can, Brenda. You have to keep me away from him. Don’t believe a word he says.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t.”

“Are you trying to tell tales, Bradley?” Roger asked, authority seething through his tone. He had moved into my peripheral vision so I at least knew he wasn’t behind me, sneaking up.

“I’m trying to tell her the truth. You’re hurting her.” He tried to look at the Lasombra but I held his head in place.

“Not as much as it’s going to hurt. Come to me Bradley.”

Time to use Dominate before he does, I thought to myself. I looked deep into the man’s eyes as I activated the power and said, “Stay with me. I will take care of you.”

“I want to, Brenda,” he cried passionately, making a poor attempt to grab my upper arms “I tried to get to you.”

I saw the Roger jerk Rafe, trying to take my attention away from Bradley but I knew this guy had to know something important or the Sabbath wouldn’t want him back so badly. I was worried for Rafe but I understood the greater good that could come from whatever information this guy had. “You can’t have them both,” the Roger taunted.

I glanced quickly and saw that Rafe's eyes were huge with uncertainty over what was going to happen next. "Rafe, remember your strength," was all I said as I returned my gaze to the man on the ground.

"What is it you wanted to tell me?" I cooed.

"It wasn't me Brenda." He was pleading with me, as if it were very important that I believed him.

"What do you mean?"

"It wasn't me Brenda. I didn't do it. It was somebody else."

"Where have I seen you before?"

"Brenda, I can't believe you don't know me." Bradley brought his dirty hand to my face again and caressed my cheek lovingly. I was getting really pissed at myself because I couldn't remember him.

"You are familiar, but..."

"It's what he's done," his voice was filled with contempt. "But you should know me anyway, Brenda."

The yellow GTO I saw here three nights ago pulled up just then, barely stopping within inches of me. I ignored it for the time being, I was racking my brain, trying to place this guy. There were subtle things about him that weren't right. I knew I had seen him before. Maybe it was his lack of coordination. His dark stringy hair was dirty and he looked as if he hadn't been taking care of himself.

Maybe when I had last seen him he hadn't acted so uncoordinated. Yes, that had to be it. He doesn't necessarily look different but it's almost as if something inside is. That had to be it. Maybe if I can get him back to the Chantry Elvira would know him.

I felt a large, angry presence behind me. I could see a pant leg and men's shoe under the front fender of the GTO. I turned and saw that a tall bald black Kindred had exited the vehicle. My only thought was that this had to be the Prince's renegade childe, Akari.

Time was now gone for me to try to figure out where I knew Bradley from. I looked one last time at him, knowing there was really no way to get out of this without losing him or Rafe. That was a situation I didn't like. I decided to try to get this guy out of here now and I would try to find him later. If I survived.

I looked into his eyes again and used Dominate. "Run, now," I said lowly and stood quickly to take a shot at the Akari. He ducked the bullet easily but I hadn't really intended to hit him. I was only giving Bradley a chance to get away.

I heard Bradley get to his feet and run away as fast as his seemingly unhelpful legs would carry him as I kept the gun level on this new Kindred. I turned to Roger and saw that Rafe had thrown him over his hip and now Rafe had his gun aimed at him.

Seeing that the situation was pretty equal now, I felt marginally better and returned my attention to Akari. Devon had his own firearm pulled now from under his jacket and shot into the air yelling, "Halt, police!"

I didn't react. Akari produced a gun and pointed it at me, a big smile spread on his face. "You think you've won?" he asked smugly.

"No. Not yet," I replied with as much sarcasm in my voice.

"You won't win. We've got the ring and we're gonna take care of all you mother fuckers."

"I'm sure your mother will have something to say about that," I said, implying Elvira, which I knew for a fact had several things to say about the matter.

"Mommy ain't gonna have a damn thing to say."

"You underestimate her," I seethed. I was glad to see he didn't think Elvira was joining him.

"Oh, I know the bitch well."

"I know her well, too. And she knows me." I heard gunfire behind me but I didn't dare to look away. Rafe had to be able to look after himself. I couldn't be there all the time.

"Yeah, we know all about you, too." During this whole exchange neither one of us broke eye contact or lowered our weapons.

"Yes. I had thought that you had an unexpected guest in your little shindig," I replied, implying Michael. I still didn't want to believe he would do such a thing. But how else would they know about me? I'd only been embraced three years.

"Yeah, he came begging," Akari said with a shrug.

"Well he didn't have anything else," I replied trying to sound flip.

Akari glanced off in the direction that Bradley had run off in. "Yeah it's amazing to me that he still wants to be close to you."

"Well I wouldn't know. I haven't had much indication of that lately."

"More than you realize," Akari replied. There was something about his tone that suggested something that I was apparently missing.

The Roger strolled to the passenger side of the GTO then and my panic over Rafe's safety rose but I kept my cool. "Akari, are we ready to roll?" he asked.

"Yeah," Akari said glancing to his companion. "I was just chit chatting with the Tremere witch. You know, the Ghost has told us so much about her."

"He could have told us more but we grow tired of his stories," Roger said as he pretended to pick imaginary lint off his suit coat sleeve.

I hadn't heard anything from Rafe and my panic rose even further in worry, but I didn't look behind me. That would show too much weakness over my ghoul. I started to back up instead, needing to put distance between the two members of the Sabbat and myself. Roger opened the passenger door, but before he got in he grinned at me and said, "Give Sarah my regards."

My face twisted at his sly implication and I retorted sarcastically, "And give mine to your Ghost. Tell him not to worry about me anymore."

"It won't be too long and you can tell him yourself," he said before he lowered himself into the car. Akari followed and the vehicle pulled away in the direction Bradley had run. I hope they don't find him first, I thought to myself as I turned and lowered the Glock.

What I saw horrified me. Rafe was on the ground, blood covered his torso and he was unconscious. Devon was also on the ground, tied in shadows at his mouth, upper body and legs. He was struggling, but of course he couldn't break away from the preternatural power.

As I hurried to Rafe, I looked at Devon and said to him sternly, "Close your eyes and concentrate on disbanding those shadows." His expression said what-the-fuck-are-you-talking-about and he looked as if he were about to lose it.

When I reached him, I kneeled on ground next to Rafe. He was still breathing but there was a long, deep gash across his chest that was bleeding badly. "Rafe, honey," I pleaded touching his face, but he didn't respond. I tried to lick the wound closed but couldn't. The cut was too deep.

I smacked his face and said his name again. His head moved a little but he didn't wake. "Rafe, come on and concentrate," I cried, tears welling in my eyes. If something happened to him I would die. I couldn't handle losing someone I cared for again.

His eyes opened weakly and I sobbed in relief. He was still alive. I braced my hands on either side of his head and quickly dropped my fangs. I pierced my tongue, letting the

vitae well a little in my mouth before I kissed him. He didn't respond at first, so I pushed my tongue past his lips to allow him the fluid that would help him heal.

"Concentrate," I urged, my tongue still in his mouth so the word was distorted. "Concentrate and heal yourself." He drank weakly at first but the drags soon grew stronger. His arms came up around me and pulled me down on top of him. I felt the blood on his chest but not a wound.

He was breathing heavy when I broke the kiss. I closed the wounds on my tongue and eased myself off him. His chest was healed but still pink. I shifted my weight to my right hand and caressed his face with the knuckles of my left hand. His eyes were open and he smiled up at me. "Hi," I said.

"Hey." His voice was strong, though a little softer than normal.

"Are you okay?" I asked moving back to sit on my heels.

"Yeah." He propped himself up on his elbows and looked around. "They took off?"

"Yes." I said, remembering Devon. I turned my head just as the last of the shadows dissipated from around him. He sat up and asked, "What in the hell is going on?"

"I was hoping you could tell me," I said moving to help Rafe who was attempting to stand. "What the hell was that?" I tried to sound like I had no clue what had just happened and sounded surprisingly convincing.

"Are you okay?" Devon asked me then turned to Rafe. "Is he okay? Man he was..."

"I know. There's a lot of blood but I can't find a wound."

"Are you ok?" he asked Rafe again.

I looked at Rafe, "What happened?"

"I have no clue. I shot at that guy who grabbed me but he hit me with I want to say was a shadow." He sounded convincingly confused as well.

"Are we in some dungeon and dragon game here?" I asked in disbelief.

I looked around and used my heightened senses to see if I could find any sign of Bradley. Unfortunately, I didn't. I hope he's long gone for now so I could find him later.

I barely heard Rafe continue our story, "Man it was like those shadows just came up out of nowhere. And I saw you go down, but..."

"Who the hell was that guy?" I interrupted. "He acted like he knew me but I have no clue. He looks familiar, but-"

"You know I think I went to school with that guy," Rafe said as if he just thought of it. "He was a lot more coordinated then when he was on the football team. Was he drunk?"

"I don't know."

"Well, you were close enough to smell him. Was he drunk?"

I didn't remember smelling any alcohol. He smelled dirty, like he hadn't had a bath in a while. "Not that I could tell."

"Maybe he was on drugs or something," Rafe suggested.

"Maybe. I just wish I knew how he knows me."

"His name's not Bradley either." Rafe said thinking. "It's George or Allan... it's George Allen," he said, snapping his fingers. The name meant nothing to me, even though the man seemed to know me and I didn't know how.

Devon was listening to our entire conversation and looking a little uncomfortable. "You know, my sister told me this was a weird town but, I didn't expect this kind of weirdness. And you know I didn't really believe her. I'm going to have to go apologize."

"Dude, I live here, and it's never been this weird," I replied.

He looked at me and said in disbelief, "I didn't believe her." He started to back away.

"Are you ok?" I asked.

"Oh, yeah. I'm fine." He looked even more freaked out now and his retreat increased. He saw his discarded gun and bent to retrieve it. "I'm fine," he repeated just before he reentered the bar.

"Bye," I said to the closed door.

"Jesus, Brenda, it was like that shadow cut me," Rafe said from behind me. "It was like a knife." I turned and walked over to stand in front of him.

"Are you sure you're ok?"

"Yeah. I'm fine. What happened to the guy?"

"He ran."

"Well, we should find him."

"Well, he went that way," I said pointing in the direction George and the GTO had gone. Rafe ripped his shirt off the rest of the way and used it to wipe off the rest of the blood on his chest.

"You make it so hard to concentrate," I commented, appreciating his well-defined torso.

"Me?" he asked in mock disapproval. "You're the one looking all sexy, holding a gun on the black guy, and I make it hard to concentrate?"

"You were in a situation where you should have been concentrating," I retorted. "Did you even boost your Potence?"

"Yeah. How do you think I got away from the guy?"

"Alright, just checking." My tone lightened.

He pulled me into his arms then and said, "I was just so afraid something was going to happen to you."

"I was afraid something was going to happen to you." My head was on his chest.

"That doesn't matter."

"Yes it does," I insisted.

"Without you I am nothing."

I smiled slightly. He had no idea how much he meant to me and here he was declaring things like he was the only one affected by this relationship. I raised my hand and caressed his bottom lip with the pad of my forefinger. "Do you still have my cell phone?"

"Yes," he said, pulling back enough to reach into his jacket and retrieve the phone.

"Go get the car," I said taking it and starting to dial the Chantry. "Let's see if we can find our new friend George again."

Rafe nodded and turned to get the car as I put the phone to my ear. It rang only twice before being answered by Elvira's housekeeper, Mary.

"Is Elvira there?" I asked.

"Of course. One moment, please, Miss Thompson."

"What is it?" Elvira asked moments later when she picked up. I proceeded to inform her about George Allan and our most resent encounter with the Sabbat. As I knew she would, Elvira recognized George's description and informed me that he was the ghoul of the Toreador Primogen I killed soon after I moved to Salem.

That information only added more questions to our situation. Why would the ex-ghoul of a Kindred I killed want to speak so desperately to me when the other members of the clan hated me and stayed far away? After his domitor's death, Arlen had let him back away from Kindred society. As a matter of fact, Ford had used Dominate to wipe away George's memories of being a ghoul so he could live a normal life again. But as I was only now just realizing, sometimes our supernatural powers don't always work to the extent we thought. As in the case of Miss Norris.

Rafe pulled up and I got into the car as I continued my conversation with the Prince. "Mr. Allen has been seen around town lately," Elvira reported. "Micky saw him downtown and called out to him but he didn't respond. He said George still had the glyph that marked him Marie Krenz's ghoul. Come to think of it, Micky did say he seemed uncoordinated as well."

"Something is odd about this whole thing," I said.

"You're right, child," she replied thoughtfully. "I'll contact Arlen and find out if any of his people have seen George."

"Good idea. If the Dominate didn't work maybe he tried to contact some of the others. Elvira, have you had any communication with Akari?" I knew I had no right to ask her about it but she would tell me what she thought I needed to know and I would have to accept it.

The line was quiet for a moment before she answered. "Yes, but it's inconsequential, childe. Idle threats and the like."

"We'll get them," I reassured her and heard a small laugh from the other end.

"I know," she said. "Why don't you see if you can locate Mr. Allen and bring him here."

"Of course." I hung up and Rafe and I spent the next two hours searching for George. We found a piece of his shirt on the side of the street but other than that came up empty handed.

We returned to the Chantry and while I went to see the Prince, Rafe went to our suite. Elvira performed Spirits Touch on the piece of fabric but what she learned only clouded what we thought we knew. The earliest vision showed George watching a man that looked like Michael getting out of a limo. There were several Kindred hiding nearby as if they were going to jump him. Next, Elvira saw Michael chained to a wall beside George. Michael appeared to have been badly bruised but he had a triumphant look on his face. George was horrified. Elvira saw Roger enter the picture to unchain Michael. The last vision was of George still chained to the wall and Michael looming menacingly over him.

"There is something very strange going on," Elvira said after the viewings were over. "I'm getting the impression that George's life has changed drastically lately. I can't explain it but these viewings are giving us important information that I don't quite understand yet."

Chapter 22: Family Contact

*"Sister of night
When the hunger descends
And your body's a fire
An inferno that never ends
An eternal flame
That burns in desire's name."
Depeche Mode
"Sister of Night"*

There were a few hours before dawn and I took my leave from Elvira to go upstairs. While I had the time I thought I would try to contact my sister again. I dialed her cell phone number and to my surprise she answered on the third ring.

"Hello?"

"Christina?" I asked, shocked that I was actually talking to her.

"Brenda? Look, I'm a bit busy right now."

"Are you alright?" I asked, alarmed. What kind of trouble was she in now? Christina always had the uncanny ability to find herself in sticky situations.

"Yeah, why?" She sounded annoyed.

"Well, you used to return the messages I left on your machine, but you haven't called me back in months," I chided.

"Sorry, I've been busy."

"With Luke?" I asked coolly.

"No," she denied. Guilt was apparent in her tone.

"What? I can barely hear you, why are you talking so softly?"

"I'm trying to stay quiet so I don't spook the frenzied Kindred," she all but hissed out.

"Excuse me? Where are you?" I couldn't believe my ears. What in the hell was she talking about?

"I'm in a parking garage looking for a frenzied Gangrel murderer. Idella asked me to look into it."

"Is Luke with you or is he the murderer?" I really didn't like Luke. He was a Gangrel that Christina had been spending too much time with since Jason had left her. I guess they have been friends for a long time but the relationship had deepened in the past couple of years.

"Neither." Her tone was cold.

"You really need to lose that boy," I replied evenly.

"I think he's losing himself," she murmured, sounding sad now. "I haven't seen him much lately."

"You should dump him for good," I shot back.

"It's kind of hard to dump him when I haven't seen him," her voice was edgy again.

"What is your deal with him anyway? Luke is a good friend."

"Let's not go there, okay?"

"We haven't been there, Brenda," she growled back.

"Yes we have. Have you talked to Antonio lately?" I said, trying to change the subject.

"Jesus, does everyone think I have to call him? Have you talked to him lately?" she shot back.

"I talk to him all the time. Of course, you haven't talked to him since Nashville." I didn't like making her feel guilty but it seemed about the only way to get anywhere with her sometimes.

"Look, I can't talk about this right now, I'm right in the middle of an investigation. Can I call you back?" Her voice was low again.

"Will you?" I asked pointedly.

"Yeah, Brenda. As soon as I get done here."

"Okay, I'll wait for your call." I replaced the phone on the base found that Rafe was looking at me expectantly.

"That sounded kind of harsh," he said pointedly and now I was the one feeling guilty.

"Maybe," I countered. "But someone has to look out for her." She didn't seem able to sometimes.

"Why?"

"She's hanging out with a Gangrel who probably only wants her money," I hissed. I knew Christina had some investments that matched my own and I was sure Luke was just free loading off her. I thought I heard her say once that he was a cat burglar by trade.

"You don't think that he loves her?" he asked as he went to the closet and removed his jacket.

"No." My reply wasn't totally convincing but I didn't care. "She belongs with Jason. He's her true love."

He was quiet for a few minutes as he finished undressing and put pajama bottoms on. "Wouldn't some people think the same thing about you and Michael?" he finally asked pensively as he gathered his clothes and put them in the hamper, pointedly putting his back to me.

"Some," I answered after a moment. "But that doesn't mean that's the way it should be." He turned to me then and looked at me doubtfully. I knew it seemed like a double standard but I couldn't help feeling the way I did about Christina, Jason and Luke. Michael and I were a totally different situation and I saw that Rafe needed proof of that so I walked over to him and wrapped my arms around his waist to plant a kiss on his waiting lips. "I love you," I murmured.

Rafe grinned as he put his arms around me and kissed me in return. We kissed for a long time. Kisses that weren't demanding. They just expressed how much we cared for each other. After a while we moved to the bed and just held each other while we kissed and talked about what was now going on with the Sabbath in the area. Christina was suppose to call me back soon and Rafe knew that so neither of us pushed the kisses further.

I heard my cell phone ring from across the room. "That must be Chris," I said getting up on one elbow to find where I'd lain the phone. It was on the table by the door and had rung three more times before I got to it.

"Hello?" I answered.

"Did I interrupt you?" Christina asked from the other end.

"No," I replied. "I just couldn't find the phone."

"What did you need, Brenda?" She sounded as if she were smiling.

"Need? I didn't need anything, I just wanted to see how you were." Did I always have to have a reason to talk to her?

"Well, other than a run in with some rats who wanted to be a bit too friendly, I'm fine."

"Rats?" I cried in repulsion. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"What are you, my mother?" she scoffed.

"Yeah," I laughed. "I'm *the* Mother." Christina knew about my standing with the Black Rose Coven.

"Just because some coven thinks you're the Goddess incarnate, doesn't mean you're my mother, Brenda," she said dryly. "Why did you really call me?"

"Well, you're not exactly keeping touch with anyone," I retorted. She could be so annoying at times the way she bristled like a porcupine.

"Not lately, no," she admitted.

"Have you talked to Antonio lately?" I asked once again.

"Between now and the last time I talked to you? No. When was the last time you talked to him?"

"About a week ago. He was excited about two Tremere that he had met in Los Angeles."

"Nina Rodriguez and Cormac," she said matter-of-factly.

"Oh, did he send you babysitters?" I asked, amusement apparent in my voice. The only way she could have known them was if they had traveled to Las Vegas because I knew she couldn't have went to Los Angeles without Antonio knowing.

"Not babysitters," she said tightly. "He sent them here to learn."

"When are you going to come out and visit me?" I asked changing gears.

"Do you want me to?" She actually sounded surprised.

"Yes, why wouldn't I?"

"I just feel like the black sheep of the family lately," she sighed.

"You're not," I reassured her. "You just need a bit of guidance now and then." I heard her sob then and I knew something really big was bothering her. "Chris? Talk to me, tell me what's wrong."

"Everything," she cried through her tears. "Everything is screwed up and I don't know what to do."

"Give him time," I said assuming she meant Jason.

"I have gave him time. Almost two years," she said bitterly.

"It may not be enough, Chris. He needs time to adjust and you have to give it to him."

"I'm not sure there's enough time in the world to adjust to this, Brenda," she sobbed horribly. I wanted to be there to put my arms around her and comfort her.

I dropped my voice before asking, "How bad do you want it, Chris?"

She took a deep breath to steady herself. "More than I can ever remember wanting anything," she said firmly.

"Then don't settle." Was all I said.

"How can I settle for someone who's never around?" she demanded. "I haven't seen Luke in almost a month."

"O, dork boy."

"Why don't you like him?"

"He's Gangrel." That should have been enough for her but I knew it wasn't. Didn't she understand that he was taking advantage of her when she was too vulnerable to know better?

"He's not that bad," she said defensively. "He's my friend."

"You could have picked a more compatible clan," I scoffed. "Ventrue perhaps, or Nosferatu."

"What if he was right, Brenda?" she asked, referring to Jason. "What if I can't deal?" When Jason had left her on a street in San Francisco he'd told her that she would have to get over it. That she wouldn't be able to come to terms with him being Nosferatu.

"Do you love him enough, Chris?"

"How can you ask me that?" she was outraged.

"If you love him enough you can deal with anything."

"Can I?"

"Yes," I said fervently.

"Brenda," she started hesitantly. "If I told you something but asked you not to mention it to Antonio, would you?"

"Not if you didn't want me to, Chris."

"Do you remember what you asked me in Nashville?" I stopped for a moment to think about the conversations we'd had in that short time and remembered that I had asked her if she'd feed from Luke, if she were blood bound to him.

"You mean about dining from someone," I said slowly.

"I never did answer you."

"No," I whispered, "you didn't." When she didn't say anything that was all the answer I needed. "How bad is it, Chris?" I breathed.

"Two out of three," she replied in a small voice.

"That bastard," I snarled. "He tricked you didn't he?"

"No," she said too quickly. "I don't think so."

"I'm coming out there. I'll kill that son-of-a-bitch." Who in the fuck did he think he was anyway? I don't care if they had played together in a sandbox as kids, Luke had no right to bind Christina to him like that.

"No," she cried frantically. "No, that's not what I want."

"Brenda, what is it?" Rafe, who had been quietly observing my conversation so far, was kneeling by my side and took my hand in his.

"Who was that?" she asked.

"That's Rafael Brown," I informed her as I smiled down at him. I freed my hand and caressed his cheek before leaning over to kiss his cheek.

"And he is...?" Christina was asking on the other end.

"My ghoul."

"Really? When did this happen?" I knew she would be surprised when I told her and hoped that she didn't try to interrogate me over the phone.

"About a week ago."

"Kind of sudden, isn't it?"

"It may be sudden," I said, pushing back a lock of hair on Rafe's forehead and he turned his head to kiss my hand. "But it's right."

"Okay." That was what I liked about Christina. She was so accepting, not like Antonio or Michael who wanted to input or change anything I did.

"You need to get away from Luke until this wears off," I said firmly, bringing the conversation back to important matters. "But I'd still like to come out there and stake the bastard."

"Brenda, he's always been a good friend to me."

"Yeah, such a good friend that he feeds you twice to bond you to him," I reminded her.

"It wasn't like that," she protested. "In both situations I needed the blood. I would have frenzied without it."

"He's a power monger," I hissed, "looking for clan secrets."

"Like Michael?" she shot back. I never thought she would have brought him up like that and I was surprised. Michael had retrieved certain files when I was still his ghoul that contained clan knowledge and rituals he'd recovered from a runaway Tremere neonate from Las Vegas. Michael never told Antonio about them and at the time I was still his ghoul and

therefore loyal to him. After my embrace I wanted to get them back on my own to prove my loyalty to the clan. I still haven't though.

"Michael was adopted Tremere," I retorted. "He had a right to the information."

"He's not of the blood," she accused. "He shouldn't have access to information that could hurt us all."

"That's our sire's call, Christina," I replied, through clenched teeth. I wasn't used to anyone questioning my motives.

"Does he even know that Michael has the files?" she countered.

"Don't you think I'm trying to take care of it?" I demanded.

"Have you told him?" she repeated. When I didn't answer she said, "You haven't, have you?"

"I have an opportunity here to resolve it. If I can't then I'll tell him. I have to prove myself to the clan, Chris. And you know as well as I do that if I told Antonio he would turn himself into the council. I can't allow that."

"No," she agreed. "So you think I should leave Vegas?" It was her turn to change the subject now.

"It wouldn't be a bad idea, at least for a while."

"How long before this starts to wear off?"

"A while," I told her. "Let me talk to Elvira, see if she'll let you come out here and study with us. Who knows, maybe he'll leave Vegas and you can go home in a few months."

"Like I see him now," she muttered.

"But you know he's there, Chris," I pointed out.

"Yeah." She took a deep breath. "I talked to him tonight," she admitted.

"Maybe you should think about changing your cell phone number or getting Caller ID," I suggested.

"That wouldn't help in this case, Bren. I got a hold of him, and it wasn't by phone."

"How did you reach him then?" I asked.

"Do you remember the gadgets we had?" When Jason had disappeared Luke had helped Christina try to find him. They were able to get a hold of some really sophisticated communication devices that they were apparently still using.

"Chris," I urged, "you'd better get rid of it." When she didn't answer I knew exactly what she was doing. "Stop playing with it and take it off," I ordered.

"I can't," she said weakly. Shit, I thought to myself. Maybe if someone else were there they could do it for her. I understood how hard it would be for her.

"Are you alone?" I asked.

"Almost," she said. "Nina and Cormac are nearby."

"Let me talk to Nina," I said forcefully. I couldn't afford for her to put this off. It would only be harder later.

She must have covered the mouthpiece because I heard her call her new friend but it was muffled. "Hello?" I heard a minute later. The voice was female and sounded a bit Hispanic.

"Hi," I began. "I need for you to do to me and my sister a favor. I want you to take something from her."

"She's a bit hostile to me right now," Nina said.

"I am not hostile, Nina," I heard Christina in the background.

"There is a communication device behind her ear," I continued to the other woman. "I need for you to removed it."

"What do you want me to do with it?" she asked, matter of factly.

"I want you to next day air it to me," I explained. "Christina has my address, send it there. Now let me talk to her again, please. I will make sure she doesn't do anything stupid."

"Okay," Nina replied hesitantly, then to Christina, "She want's to talk to you."

"What?" Christina asked, gruffly when she was once again on the line.

"I want you to promise me two things," I said.

"And what would that be?"

"First, promise me that you will not hurt Nina."

"I promise I won't hurt Nina," she agreed.

"Good. Now promise that you will allow her to do what I've asked of her."

"Jesus, you like to push me, don't you?" she asked through clenched teeth.

"Chris, trust me on this. Promise me."

"I promise," she finally agreed. "What did you ask her to do?"

"Let me talk to Nina again." When the other woman was back on I told her to go ahead and in less than a minute my sister was free of the device and Nina promised to send it to me right away. Christina sounded a little lost when she got back on the phone but when I said I would be sure to speak to Elvira she sounded better. We hung up a few minutes later.

"Well, that sounded a little more civil," Rafe commented when I set the phone back on the table.

I grinned and bent over to kiss him again. "Hopefully, you'll get to meet my sister soon," I said when I straightened.

"Really? That would be great." He stood and pulled me to my feet. "It will be day soon," he said, nuzzling my neck. I needed no further invitation as he maneuvered us to the bed and started to slowly undress me between kisses. All reservations were gone now.

There was a message from Christina on my voice mail the next evening. "Who split the milk?" was all she said and I had no idea what she was talking about. Rafe and I dressed quickly and I went in search of the Prince. Rafe had some paperwork to do so he stayed in the rooms. I found Micky just outside my suite and he told me Elvira was out already.

"Can I ask you something?" I said. Since Elvira wasn't here I figured I could at least run the idea past Micky to see what he thought.

"Sure," he grinned. "What's up?"

"Do you remember my sister, Christina?" After he nodded I continued. "Would there be a problem if she came out to stay with me for a while?"

"Not that I can see," he replied with a shrug. "How soon are we talking here?"

"I'm not sure. She's involved in something right now but I think she could be ready in a week or two." I didn't mention the reason for her visit yet. I'd made a promise not to tell Antonio but I didn't think Christina would appreciate me blabbing to everyone I knew.

"I'll mention it to the Prince," Micky said. "Like I said, I don't think there will be a problem, unless the Sabbath are still a problem. I'm sure an extra hand wouldn't hurt, though. I'll let you know."

"Thanks, Micky." I told him I planned on doing some studying on the Sabbath to get ready for the fight I knew would come soon. We went downstairs together and said our good-byes at the library. I pulled out a small volume on Sabbath lore and found a comfortable chair. I found some information on a couple of the Sabbath paths and a few rituals that I took notes on in case they came in handy. I also found some counter magic rituals that I jotted down as well. When it was dark in Las Vegas I tried to call Christina's apartment but the phone was disconnected so I tried her cell. I got her voice mail.

"I tried calling your apartment but the phone is disconnected," I said. "What's the matter, didn't you pay your bill? Or are you just prepping to come out here?"

She called back a half an hour later. "What happened, Brenda?" she asked calmly.

"You mean with your message?" I asked. "I don't know. What happened?"

"I was chastised by Idella last night for not telling her about the situation I'm in," she replied with a sigh. I looked up and saw that Elvira had entered the library. She looked around the room and when she saw me, headed in my direction.

"How did she find out?" I asked lowly.

"You tell me and we'll both know," she retorted.

Elvira reached me then. "Are you speaking with your sister?" she asked and I nodded.

"Just a minute, Chris," I said into the phone then turned it from my mouth. "What is it my Prince."

"I just got a phone call from Las Vegas," she informed me. "I didn't like what Idella had to tell me."

I turned the receiver back to speak. "Is your apartment taken care of?" I asked Christina. I had no idea how Idella found out about the bond but I could guess that her response wasn't in any way positive.

"Yeah, all my stuff is at the Chantry," she replied. "Even my phone has been shut off."

"She's staying at the Chantry now," I said to Elvira and after her reply I asked Christina, "Did you hear what Elvira said?"

"No," she replied weakly.

"She said you have one week to get here."

"Okay." She sounded so defeated I wished I could wrap her in my arms again. There would be time enough for that later.

"She's agreed," I told the Prince.

"See that she's here," was all Elvira said before turning to leave.

"Christina," I warned her, "you'd better be here in a week. You don't want me to come get you."

"No," was all she said.

"Do you want me to arrange for your things to be shipped here?" I offered. There wasn't anything else I could do to help her now.

"What about my car?"

"We can get you a new one," I assured her.

"Whatever," she said quietly. "Just ... make the arrangements for me. I'll fly there in a week, after we've found this killer."

"Good. Elvira has moved out of the Bathori Mansion, and there's plenty of room for you there with me."

"I could stay at the Chantry –" she tried.

"No. You can stay with me."

"I guess I'll see you in a week then," she relented. We rung off and I tried to study some more. It was hard to concentrate at first but I convinced myself there was nothing more I could do for my sister until she got here. The Sabbath problem was what I had to worry about right now. I wanted the city safe when she got here.

I stayed in the library for another few hours until my cell phone rang again. To my surprise it was Christina again. I was just about to make fun of her for calling twice in one night when I noticed how upset she was. Apparently, her friend Lena Stockton was missing. Lena was a mortal who had been friends with Jason for a long time. She had in fact helped

Christina and Luke look for him when he was abducted. My heart lurched for my sister because now she had to deal with Lena's disappearance as well.

"Can you call Idella and let her know what's going on?" she asked. "And let Elvira know that I will come to Salem as soon as she is found?" I didn't like the idea at all. I knew Lena was important to her but the blood bond had to be taken care of as soon as possible.

"She won't be very happy," I warned her. "I'll have to see what I can do."

"Would it be too much to ask for you to make plane reservations for me? A private jet would be the best, I'll take a commercial airline to New York, but then I need to get to Austria as quickly as possible."

"I can handle that."

"One more thing, sister," she said quietly.

"Anything."

"Can you contact Talon Graves? Antonio would know how to get a hold of him." He should, I thought, Antonio is acting Tremere Primogen there.

"I will tell him Lena is in danger," I assured her.

"Thank you," she said and quickly hung up. I went to find the Prince.

Elvira agreed to allow me to travel to Los Angeles in person to speak to the Prince of the city. She said that even with the unsolved Sabbat problem the information I carried was too important to tell over the phone. I then called my sire and he promised to arrange for a meeting with the Prince as soon as I arrived. Elvira offered me the use of her plane and I quickly said yes.

Chapter 23: Los Angeles

*"I guess you heard he's gone to LA
he says that behind my eyes I'm hiding
and he tells me I pushed him away
that my hearts been hard to find"*

Tori Amos

"Baker Baker"

Rafe and I made love as the plane flew cross-country. Afterward, as I lay in his arms, I thought about what going to Los Angeles meant. This would be the first face-to-face meeting with my sire in over two years. Even though I spoke to Antonio often over the phone and via our mental link, it wasn't the same as being in his presence.

I have often wondered why Antonio hasn't taken a more active interest in my existence. From what I have learned of Tremere, sires are responsible for their progeny and take pride in passing to them their secrets. Antonio did this in the beginning when we were in Austria just after my embrace, but after we came back to the States and Michael found out about my new existence, Antonio seemed to almost pull away.

Antonio was waiting in a black stretch limousine when the plane landed. Rafe sat in the front with the driver on the ride to Talon Graves' home, so I had the opportunity to explain to Antonio the situation surrounding Christina's move to Salem. He wasn't any happier than Idella or Elvira were, but he felt my sister would be in well enough hands with us. He seemed to be impressed with my actions.

"Do I please you, sire?" I asked after a moment. I needed his approval.

"Yes, why do you ask, childe?" His expression was surprised. I finally had the opportunity to notice his appearance. His hair was pulled back in its customary ponytail at the nape of his neck but I realized that his choice of clothing had changed since our last meeting. They were more modern now. He actually had black jeans on!

"We have not spent much time together-" I started hesitantly.

"That is unfortunate. I regret that we have not been together. When Elvira asked for you, I could not refuse her."

"That is what I was thinking about on flight. Because we have not spent time together, I feel as if I don't know you well." My tone was a little terse and bordered on childlike.

"That is true, my childe. I feel, however, that the blood creates ties that distance cannot undo." Antonio took my hand that had rested on the seat by my side and gave it a squeeze.

"I am happy to know this," I said, returning the squeeze. I was still hesitant about how I spoke to him, but I felt a little better about our relationship.

"I have spoken to Elvira," he timber was even, like he was talking to a child about their report card.

"Really?" I couldn't help but feel and sound surprised.

"Has she not she told you?" There was a slight touch of humor and teasing in his voice. "I have talked to her as I have talked to Idella about Christina." I knew I looked surprised but I couldn't hide it.

I would have blushed if I could. I had no idea Antonio was keeping tabs on Christina or myself, but this knowledge also helped strengthen the bond between us that I had thought severed along with my bond with Michael. I felt the need to change the subject to hide my surprise.

"What do you think of Rafe?" I asked looking forward.

"Well, I understand he has unique qualities for a ghoul. Is there something you wanted?"

"I wanted to know that I have chosen well." I needed to have acceptance from him just like I had needed it from my father before I was introduced to this world of eternal night.

"He is obviously strong and handsome. Do you get along well?"

"Yes."

"Live day to day," he said with a smile and squeezed my hand again. "And he cares for you?" he asked in a fatherly tone. I nodded. "Has he asked for more? I heard about the boss' son in New York."

"That is a subject we have not yet touched on." I felt silly talking to Antonio about it when Rafe and I hadn't yet. "There is only one thing I could hope for- that would be that he had more experience to deal with Michael."

"Sometimes a trial by fire is necessary," he sounded matter-of-factly.

"Unfortunately, you may be right." But I didn't like the sound of it.

I looked to the front of the vehicle where Rafe sat again. He must have known he had my attention because he looked back at the same moment and gave me a wink and a smile. I smiled back discreetly, not wanting to let Antonio to know the extent of my feelings for Rafe. "Maybe Christina needs a ghoul," I said, wistfully. I was rewarded with a grunt from Antonio. He didn't like mortals much. Too timely, he always said.

We spent the rest of the ride talking about Michael. Antonio still claimed he hadn't heard from him and again asked if I wanted him to return to Salem with me to help with the Sabbat. I declined, saying I would tell Elvira of his offer and if she felt he was needed she would call.

When we arrived at the Prince's home, Antonio and I were led into a beautiful study. It was decorated in warm colors and its contents were practical yet stylish. I was told that Rafe would not be allowed in the room with the Prince and so a house ghoul took him off to get a bite to eat. I smiled as he left and he gave me an impish grin.

I was nervous. I had heard many stories about this Talon Graves and none of them were really nice. He ran Los Angeles with an iron hand and he was known to be very harsh if circumstances demanded it. He was Gangrel so I guess that told the whole story. Gangrels are known for being loners and their use of the discipline, Protean, that allowed them to see very well in the dark, grow fierce one inch claws on each hand and to turn themselves into wolves or bats. Salem has a few but I haven't had much contact with them.

Graves didn't keep us waiting long. He was a striking man with long blond hair and a powerfully built body. Antonio introduced us and Graves took my hand gently. "What can I do for you?" he asked, indicating that we all have a seat.

"I received a phone call from my sister, Christina," I began, settling myself into an armchair. "She told me she got a call from someone you know in Austria. Do you know a Lena Stockton?" Christina had also made it quite clear just how much she disliked Graves but I wasn't about to tell him that.

Graves looked a little uncomfortable which I found odd. "Yes," he replied.

"It seems that she has been abducted. It wasn't Lady Stockton who phoned her. It was a man with which she has been involved with. Mikhail Provinof?"

Graves actually paled. "Goddamn," he muttered, barely controlling himself.

"I'm sorry to be the bearer of bad news, Mr. Graves. Christina thought you would want to know and she had no way to contact you herself. Christina is on her way now to the Holding." Behind his mask of control I read something in Talon Graves eyes that said there

was a story lurking there. Lena Stockton must have meant a great deal to him at one point. "I met Lady Stockton two years ago and I thought she was a lovely person," I ended.

"I want to thank you for delivering this message in person," Graves started. "There are many of our kind that would have had another come or call." He glanced to Antonio and said, "You have a responsible child here, Antonio. You have done well."

Antonio looked to me. "I have."

I was slightly embarrassed and looked into my lap because I had nothing to say. I heard Graves pick up the phone that was on the table next to him. After a few moments he said, "Yes. I need to speak to Jason." My head snapped up. I knew if Graves was concerned about Lena he would probably send someone to help Chris, but I hadn't expected him to call Jason. Christina was going to be pissed to say the least. I wish I could be there. The least I could do, I guess was to wait around and tell the son-of-a-bitch what I thought of him. Jason eventually got on the line and Graves told him he needed him in LA right away. Apparently Jason had been staying in San Francisco.

Antonio and I waited until Jason arrived and I was surprised when he walked in. Christina had said that Jason had been embraced by Nosferatu but he looked the same to me. Clan Nosferatu are all deformed in some way. With green or poky skin or their features are distorted somehow. Basically, they aren't pretty anymore. Jason based his life on his looks before his embrace. Christina said he had many different aliases and it was for that that he was turned into Nosferatu to lose the ability.

The three of us told Jason about Lena's disappearance and he didn't take it very well. He agreed to meet Christina in Austria as soon as it could be arranged. Antonio suggested two members of the Clan Tremere from Los Angeles might come in handy and Graves agreed. Nina Rodriguez and Cormac had been sent to Las Vegas by Antonio to study and had already met Christina there. I remembered talking to Nina already and thought she was nice.

My work was done and I rose to leave. "It has been a pleasure to meet you Mr. Graves. I hope to have more dealings with you in the future." Then I turned to Antonio, "Sire, it was good to see you again." And I bent to kiss his cheek.

As I turned to Jason my face became hard. "I hope I have more room for Lena than you did for Christina in your black heart, you bastard. Then maybe you can get her home and back to the ones who care about her. I'm sure those feelings are beyond you now." I turned to the Prince, "Mr. Graves," and I walked out of the room. I didn't care if there were repercussions to what I had just said. Christina was my sister and some had to look out for her.

Rafe was waiting out in the hall and we were taken straight to the airport where we boarded the plane and flew back to Boston. I was quiet on the trip and I think Rafe knew I was contemplating something because he didn't press me about my silence. We landed in Boston near dawn so we stayed the day on the plane and drove back to Salem the following night.

The rest of the week flew by. Everyone was out looking for the Sabbath but they were only seen once down by the docks. George was seen as well but had eluded all attempts at talking much less being brought in.

I also had another run in with my not so friendly Inquisition lady. Rafe and I were setting our thoughts at ease by checking out Samantha's neighborhood when I saw the piece of shit van parked on the side of the road. I stopped a few yards behind her and both Rafe and I exited the car and he leaned a hip against the front quarter panel as I approached the driver's side. It was her alright.

"Hello," I said lightly, noticing that both her hands were on the steering wheel.

"Hey." Always a girl of many words.

"What are you doing in this neighborhood?"

She looked in her side mirror to check where Rafe was. "Do you know George Allen?" she asked abruptly.

"Yes," I replied, hoping that she hadn't killed him.

"I heard you were looking for him." Now she was looking out the front windshield. She seemed nervous for some reason. "I've seen him at Mack Park."

"Thanks. We'll check it out." We exchanged a few more pleasantries and I finally found out her name. Eliza Dushku. When she started the van and pulled away I returned to the car and told Rafe about the exchange.

"That's interesting," he said in response to her uncharacteristic agreeable nature.

"Yeah. Why don't we head over there and see what we can find."

"Sure," he replied and got back into the car. The park was only down the street and when we pulled in I noticed Eliza's van parked in the lot. As far as I knew the park was empty except for Rafe, myself and Eliza; wherever she was. Maybe she was meeting someone who was coming on foot.

Quietly, Rafe and I walked through the well-manicured lawn of the small park. There weren't any lights because the park was supposed to be closed after dark but the moonlight gave off enough illumination to see.

"What's that?" Rafe asked as he pointed in the direction of a bulky clump of brush. I peered closer and could barely make out what looked like a large cardboard box.

"I'm not sure," I replied. "Let's have a look." It appeared to be a homeless person's shelter. There were empty food containers carefully stacked to one side and a pile of torn blankets that served as a bed. Within reach of the opening was a stack of extra clothing that was neatly folded. When I picked up a pair of pants that was on top of the stack I glimpsed something small and shiny fall out. It took me a minute to locate it but when I did I found that I was holding a small ring. I pulled back a little and held it up to get a better look at it in the moonlight.

"My God," I breathed recognizing it instantly.

"Brenda, what is it?" Rafe was next to me. He had pulled out a pen from his pocket and was picking around the makeshift bed.

I attempted to swallow before I spoke. "Michael gave me this ring when we were together in Vegas." I glanced over at Rafe and saw his face harden. "When I went back to my apartment to pack everything to move out here I realized that it was missing. I always figured that he had taken it." Michael had briefly told me once that he sometimes took personal mementos from women who were important to him, usually jewelry. The first time he had ever fed after his embrace he had accidentally killed the young girl who had been in the wrong place at the wrong time. The girl had worn a pair of diamond earrings and Michael had taken one that he wears to remind himself what happened when you didn't control the beast. I think the memory of that girl haunts him more than he lets on.

"What is it doing here?" Rafe voiced.

"I'm not sure. I'll take it back to the Chantry and see if Elvira can tell me anything." I slipped the ring in my pocket and for the first time noticed that the box and clothing smelled familiar. They smelled like George did that night at David's Bar.

Remembering that evening brought back the memories of how George had reminded me of Michael. It was amazing how he used the same words and body language as Michael. The sneaking suspicions came back to me again but I didn't voice anything to Rafe. He had risen and I glanced up and saw how uncomfortable he was.

"You okay?"

"Yeah," he smiled slightly. "Just jittery is all. You know I used to come here all the time as a kid but the whole place takes on weird shadows in the dark."

I rose and brushed off my hands on my pants. "Let's get of here. I'm sick of playing Dick Tracy for the night." Rafe's smile widened and he put his arm around my shoulders. We walked arm and arm together toward the car. Movement off to our left caught my attention and I glanced over to see a man moving toward us and he was carrying a long stick of some kind with a sharp point on the end. He was about 6'2" and had short brown hair. The weapon wasn't raised but it was intimidating none the less.

"Did you want something, buddy?" Rafe asked gruffly.

"Isn't it late to be out?" the gut replied and stopped a few yards from us.

"There's no law." Rafe wasn't going to let this guy push him around and I let him take the lead.

"Not normally," the man said with a shrug. "But maybe you should pick your friends better." He was looking at me now and I began to wonder if he was the reason Eliza was here. Had they had a meeting and we just happen to stumble on to him as he was leaving the park. His choice of weapons surely cried out that he could be a hunter of some kind. Was he an Inquisition member, too?

"What do you mean?" Rafe tried to sound blasé as I notice someone sneaking up behind the guy. It was a female but I couldn't tell who it was. Before the man had a chance to respond the girl came up and hit him on the head, knocking him out. I saw then that it was Eliza and all her friendly pretenses from earlier were gone.

"Are you asking to get staked or what?" she barked out as she dropped to one knee and checked for a pulse in the guys neck.

"So I take it he's a friend of yours?" I asked.

"Maybe," she replied as she stood and looked around. "I didn't expect you to come running down here when I told you about that guy. Look, I can't hang around here. He won't be out for long." She started to walk away then stopped and looked back again. "Do you have a number where I can contact you?"

I was speechless but quickly pulled a card from my pocket. Perhaps the girl wanted to come back into the fold of Kindred society. She had been a ghoul once before by her aura and maybe she was craving the blood again and needed someone to reintroduce her. I handed her the card and she walked off without another word.

When we returned to the Chantry Rafe and I found Micky and Elvira in her study. When I produced the ring and told her of its significance she took it and performed Spirit's Touch on it. She was able to confirm that it was indeed the ring Michael had given me by the pictures she saw. One image in particular that stood out was of a high-tech control room I didn't know of where Michael was injured. He was feeding from blonde woman and Elvira said he was wearing the ring on his pinky. Christina was there as well, along with Luke Thomas and Lena Stockton.

Elvira also saw him in a dive with a bunch of Mexicans. His weapons were drawn and he was firing. He had the ring on there, too. Finally she described a picture of someone that wasn't Michael. In fact, it sounded like George and he was looking at the ring and crying bitterly.

Chapter 24: I'm Trying To Get Back To You

*"I feel you
Inside my mind.
I feel you
Your heart it sings."
Depeche Mode
"I Feel You"*

Rafe and I left Elvira and went back upstairs to our suite. I tried to gauge Rafe's reaction to hearing about the visions and he appeared to be holding up fine. He was still tense and acted not quite comfortable or happy about the whole thing. I sat on the couch and asked him, "Are you okay?"

He came over and sat next to me on the couch then put an arm around me. "I should be asking you if you're okay."

"I'm okay. I, uh—there's all this stuff going through my head, and I don't know what to think." What I was thinking about was that now seemed like a good time to contact Michael via our mental link. I don't know how many times I'd stopped myself in the past but now I was confused enough to consider it.

"I understand. Is there anything I can do to help you? Anything to make you feel better?"

"No," I said automatically. "Actually, there is a ritual I would like to try. Could you give me an hour, alone?" I knew that if I was going to do this I didn't want Rafe to be with me when I tried. I was afraid all my emotions would be written on my face or that I would say something personal to Michael out loud and I knew that either of those possibilities would hurt Rafael and I wanted to avoid that.

"I guess," he said hesitantly.

"Are you sure?"

"Well, if you're sure you want to be alone then I'll go. I can find something to do."

"If there are some things you want to get done up here, maybe I can go in the other room."

"Well, that is my room. I can go in there."

"Yeah, but everything is in here," I said laughing slightly.

"Yes, but isn't that true of all your ritual stuff?"

"For this one I don't need anything. Just concentration."

"I think I'd rather you stay here if you don't mind," he was pointing to the floor. "I can take the lap top into the next room."

"Okay."

"I'll do that then," he was gathering the computer and some files. "That way if you need me, I'll be right here." He was smiling as he crossed the room to me again and kissed me lightly before going next door.

I got comfortable on couch and closed my eyes, concentrating. I tried to feel for Michael's consciousness and after a few minutes I was rewarded with a faint impression that was very hard to connect with.

Michael, I tried hesitantly and the connection became slightly stronger.

Brenda? It felt like him but I didn't know whether to be relieved to be speaking to him after all this time or wanting to give him a verbal tongue-lashing.

Where are you? I thought to him.

I'm here.

Michael, what are you doing?

I'm trying to get back to you. His tone was desperate but it didn't fit with the facts I had about his recent behavior.

Are you involved with the Sabbath here?

I thought you knew me better than that.

I thought I did, too.

Then why would you think I would be? What he was doing was being evasive.

There is evidence suggesting, I persisted. The reply was very faint and I couldn't make it out. *What?* I asked.

I'm losing you, Brenda.

Where are you?

I'm here.

Where?

I don't know where here is. It's a basement. I don't know where. Where are you?

Are you in Salem?

I think so. I then received mental pictures of David's Bar and the front of a house that looked like the cottages that are all over New England. I could make out the house number easily, 624. I had no idea what street the house could be on and when I asked Michael where it was, I couldn't hear his reply. I received an image of the same kind of basement with chains on wall that Elvira described earlier from her visions. Then I saw an image of Rafe.

Who is this? Michael asked.

Where have you seen him? I wasn't about to let him make me feel guilty about my relationship with Rafe but I didn't want to start any hurt feelings in Michael.

With you.

Where?

At your house and around town. And in your car.

I could ask the same of you of some things I have heard about.

What are you talking about?

A blonde. You were feeding from her.

I know a lot of blondes Brenda. I feed from a lot of blondes. You know my limitations. Who is this guy, Brenda? His voice was still faint and weak.

He's handling some of my business affairs.

And you as well it appears. His tone was hard and unyielding. I had to take a minute to get my own tone even again.

What does that mean to you Michael? It's been over two years. Are you trying to play territorial now?

Brenda, you know I love you. He could have shot me and given me less pain.

Again, I had to compose myself before answering. *Well, you have a weird way of showing it.*

He didn't reply, either our connection was cut off or he wasn't answering.

Are you there?

I'm here. I've always been here.

What are you doing here?

I'd like to know that myself. They don't give me a lot of information.

Who's they? A picture of Roger Campbell, the Lasombra of the pack, entered my mind.

They seem to know a lot about you.

Chains and hot brands can bring a lot out of a man. I didn't doubt that it was him. I knew it was and I knew he was telling the truth. He was holding something back, but he was telling the truth.

What are you not telling me?

About what?

I sense that you are telling me the truth, but it's almost as if you are holding something back.

He was beginning to fade in and out: Brenda for years I -- and you know I wanted to be there. --I would come to you if I could, but I can't. --

Michael, you're fading. Concentrate.

They're doing something.

Who's there?

All of them?

I'm coming.

Brenda, stay away. They'll try to hurt you.

They've already tried. Somebody has. I was thinking of the girl.

What are you talking about?

Somebody tried to kill me.

Who?

Someone, who's in love with you, I think. I sent to him a mental picture of the girl from coven that was at the park the first time in Boston. *Vivian? Violet? Vanessa?* I thought.

I'm gonna kill her. Rage seemed to fill his being.

No, she's mine.

Not if I can get free and get my hands on her.

I'm coming for you.

He was fading and there was nothing I could do to stop it. I felt pain coming from him and his control faded.

Brenda...? Then a drawn out scream, NNNoooo!!!

And the connection was gone.

I immediately rose from the couch and grabbed a piece of paper from the table. I quickly wrote down the house number and everything I could remember about the front of the house. After that, I put on my figure eight and holstered the Glocks, thinking I would have to retrieve the PPK from the glove box. I then called down to have my car brought around. Jax answered and agreed to have the car pulled up right away. "There's a moving truck here and they want to know what to do with the boxes and stuff," he said. It took me a moment to realize it must have been Christina's stuff from Las Vegas.

"Can you have them take it to the house, please?"

"All of it?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. Sure, Miss Thompson." I quickly told him which room to have my sister's belongings put in and asked Jax to phone ahead and let my "house sitters" know they are coming. "I'll be down in a few minutes," I then said. "Is Elvira here still?"

"I believe she is in her study."

"Thank you." I hung up phone and crossed to the door to Rafe's room. He was sitting on the edge of the bed with his coat off. I could see that he wore his figure eight and I smiled. It looked as if he might be online or something. I stood there for a moment to just look at him; I was really upset by my conversation with Michael. It was amazing how much of

an effect he still had over me. Michael could confuse my senses faster than any other man I ever knew. He knew about Rafe and he acted as if he still cared about me, as if the past two years and how he left had never happened.

I must have appeared alarmed because when Rafe noticed I was standing there he looked at me in concern. "Brenda? Are you okay?" he asked getting up from the bed and coming to where I am stood in the doorway. He laid his hands on my upper arms and looked deeply into my eyes, apprehension showing plainly on his face. "You look really upset. What happened?"

"I'm okay." I smiled up at him.

"What happened?" he repeated. He sounded so worried that I wanted to wrap him in my arms him and protect him forever.

"Let's just say my ritual was successful to some extent."

"And that's making you cry?"

"I'm not crying."

"No, but it looks like you're going to at any minute." He pulled me into his arms and held me so close that I felt safe for a while. Please, oh God let this be all right, I thought. Let us walk away from this alive.

I put my arms around his waist and held him tight. "I gotta go out."

"Okay," he pulled back enough to look down at me. "Give me a minute to close this up and I'll be right with you."

"Just meet me downstairs. I have to find Elvira."

"Okay. Are you sure you're alright?"

"I'm fine," I said giving him a smile that I hoped convinced him. I gave him a final squeeze and left the suite.

I went to Elvira's study and knocked on the door. "Come in."

After I had closed the door I approached her desk. She was looking at the bookcases, pensively. "Hello?"

"Oh, Brenda. Yes. Come in," she said turning in her chair to face me. "What can I do for you?"

"I need to go out."

I must have looked visibly upset because Elvira leaned forward slightly, studying me, and asked, "Is everything all right, childe?"

"Yeah, maybe. I don't know. There is something I haven't told you about, my Prince. It's not a big thing - I promised myself I wouldn't use it. Are you aware of the telepathic bond Antonio and I share?" Elvira looked at me like I was speaking to her about general hygiene. Her face seemed to ask; who do you think I am?

"I am aware that it exists."

"Antonio taught me this when I was first embraced."

"Yes. And I believe he taught Michael as well."

"He did. I also can communicate with Michael in this way."

"I was told that was the case." I was a little taken aback. Would Elvira ever cease to amaze me with her knowledge of not only myself, but also everyone else that came to her city? I felt very proud that she had taken me under her wing.

"I have not used it in a very long time."

"I take it you used it this evening?" She once again leaned back in her chair and steepled her fingers.

"Yes."

"You seem quite upset."

"Through the conversation with him, I received images of a house where he says he is being held in the basement." I approached the desk and gave her the piece of paper that I had written my description of the house on but she was already rattling off every detail. "Yes. That sounds about right." I knew astonishment rang through my voice and Elvira smiled slightly.

"I, too, have been shown this house."

"How?" I thought I knew but I had to ask to be sure.

"Suffice it to say that I have seen it," I should have known she would sidestep the question. "I have been unable to locate the house," she admitted.

"I would like to go out this evening and look for it."

"All right. I would, however, like you to take Tyler with you." Tyler Keith is another member of House Tremere in Salem. He is rather short with thin hair and a quick smile. He has a wonderful sense of humor and is very trustworthy. I knew he was embraced earlier in the century by the previous Prince's child, Gary Mascetti. Tyler's sire was now dead and he was never close to Beth or her lineage so Elvira did not fear betrayal from him. "There is safety in numbers," Elvira continued. "I assume you will be taking Rafael?"

"Yes."

"And I don't have to ask if you're both armed."

"No, you don't."

"I believe Tyler is in the library doing some reading. I'm sure if you tell him that I asked you to take him with you, he'd be willing to go along. If I'm not mistaken, 624 must be near the center of town. I have had people out looking but they haven't come up with anything."

"Well, hopefully we can succeed, my Prince," I said.

"Good luck."

"Thank you. I will go prepare." I left quickly and headed for the library, looking around for a house ghoul to have my car returned to the garage and Rafe's brought up instead because mine only had room for two. No one was in sight so I picked up the phone in the library and spoke to Jax again. The arrangements were quick and I also asked to have the light to the license plate be unscrewed. Jax said that there would be no problem and just before he hung up I heard him say that my request was the third one of its kind that evening. I smiled. Apparently there were other covert activities going on tonight.

I replaced the hand set on its cradle and turned to locate Tyler. He was seated by himself and reading from a large volume. I realized we were the only occupants of the room and thought Elvira must have everyone busy, looking for information on the Sabbat.

"Tyler," I said to get his attention after I had stood by his table, unnoticed, for a moment.

His back was to me so Tyler had to turn in the chair. When he saw who it was he smiled and rose from his seat, "Brenda. Good to see you this evening."

"Hi, Tyler. It's good to see you, too. Listen, Elvira suggested that you could accompany me out tonight. I'm looking for a house that the Sabbat maybe at."

"Not a problem. I was doing some reading but it can wait." He turned to place a bookmark between the pages and closed the book. "Where are we going?" he asked as we headed toward the library door.

"Well, here is the description." I handed him the paper and he read it quickly. "I have no idea what street it's on, I only have a house number."

"There's a lot of streets in Salem," Tyler commented simply.

"And we'll have to cover them." My tone was also simple.

"If you're willing to try, I'm willing to go along."

"I am. Elvira seems to think that given the house number it's in the center of town."

"Generally each street starting from the center of town is the one hundred blocks, the second is the two hundreds, the third, three hundreds and so on," Tyler explained. "So it has to be near the center in order to be a six hundred."

"Right." Tyler had obviously lived here a long time because in my two years here, I had never realized what he was telling me.

"So where do you want to start?"

I thought a moment and said, "Let's try near David's Bar. That's where they've been seen the most. I'm having a car brought around now. My ghoul will be accompanying us."

"That would be Rafael?"

"Yes."

"He seems like a fine young man."

"Yes, he is." We arrived in the foyer then and Sam, another of the house ghouls, was just coming in the front door carrying a flower. He caught sight of me and headed our way. I was happy to see Rafe was in the foyer as well, waiting.

"Miss Thompson, I was just looking for you. There's been a delivery for you." He held what I now saw to be a red rose out to me. I took it from him and realized that there was a card attached. At first, I thought the rose was from Rafe, but when I saw the card I knew it wasn't from him.

To enjoy a single flower over a dozen tells me that you have changed. Is there room in your heart for me? - M

I was shaken but managed to tuck the card into my pocket and quickly scanned the flower for miniscule cameras or listening devices. Sam was still there and I asked him if Micky were still there. He said no but that Lucien was. Did I want him to find him? Lucien worked with Micky on clan security.

"Actually, I want you to take this to him and have it checked for listening devices." I handed him back the flower. I knew I sounded absolutely ridiculous and borderline hysterical but these people had no idea what Michael's ghoul, Birkoff, was capable of with technology. I did. "Then I want it destroyed. I want it incinerated."

Sam took the rose, gave me a slight bow and left quickly. I looked up to see Rafe standing next to me with a concerned expression on his face but to his credit; he said not a word. I looked to Tyler who wore the same expression but also said nothing. "Are you ready?" I asked.

"Yeah, whenever you're ready."

"Rafe," I said turning to him, "have you met Tyler?"

"Yes. I've met Mr. Keith." His tone was very respectful and again I was very proud of him.

"Good to see you again, Rafael," Tyler said extending his hand and the two men shook.

"Tyler will be coming with us tonight." I handed Rafe the paper. "We are looking for this house."

Rafe studied the paper for a moment then looked at me and said, "Brenda, I know where that house is."

I was amazed. "Where? What street?"

"Barr Street. Not far from Samantha and Rachel's places. I had a friend that grew up in this house." He was pointing at the paper.

"Excuse me for a moment," I said to Tyler. "I should let the Prince know about this."

"Of course."

I returned to Elvira's study and knocked on the door.

"Brenda? You're back a bit soon." She was still seated behind her desk.

"I just gave the description of the house to Rafe and he knows where it is."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"Quite a handy little man you have there."

"Do you wish to have more than just the three of us go?"

"Yes. Let me call Micky." She called and let him know where the house was and he told her he was on his way.

"Good, we'll meet him there," I said. "By the way, there was a flower that was just delivered. Damn it – "

"What is it?"

"I forgot to ask Sam who brought it." I pulled out the card and showed it to her. After reading it she looked at me quizzically and asked, "When did you enjoy a single rose over a dozen?"

"Rafe has given me single roses."

"What does that have to do with dozens?" she asked still perplexed.

"Michael sends dozens."

"Ah."

"Michael knows about Rafe. Apparently he has seen us together." The full meaning of this hit me then. Of course Michael would know about Rafe. It had to have been him that ordered the cameras and sound devices installed in my house. And of course I was to enthralled when I talked to him to have my head on straight and think of these things at the proper time. I felt like such a fool.

"I see. This could be a sticky situation," she commented.

"Could be."

"I have faith in your judgement."

"I'll do the best I can."

"I know you will, childe."

"Well, we should go check this out."

"Yes. Keep me informed." I excused myself and returned to front hall, where Sam was waiting.

"Sam, by any chance do you remember who delivered that rose?"

"It was a girl. She was in her early twenties, had dark skin, blondish hair and dark eyes."

"Was she dressed well?"

"Yes. She drove an Oldsmobile. It looked like there was somebody else in the car but I couldn't see who. Sabian might have got a better look. He's bringing the car around."

It might be Vivian, I thought to myself. "Thank you, Sam." We went outside and I decided to let Rafe drive. "Sam said you might have gotten a look at the Oldsmobile that brought the delivery," I asked Sabian.

"Yes, Miss Thompson. It was gray. There was the woman who gave Sam the rose for you and there was a young guy with glasses and short hair that stayed in the vehicle."

I told him thank you as I again put a mental check in the Birkoff column. He would not be in town without Michael, I was certain of that. What in the hell was Michael up to?

I got in the back of the car on the passenger side as Tyler entered behind Rafe who had taken the wheel. My Auspex was peaked during the ten-minute drive to the house,

keeping an eye out for anyone following us. I noticed Micky when he pulled in behind us just as we turned onto Barr Street.

The house was lit on all floors from what I could tell, and every light was on in the basement. Was Michael still there? The garage door stood open, but there were no lights on inside and there were absolutely no signs of life on the premises. Rafe pulled over just passed the house while Micky continued on to do what I assumed to be a circle around the block. He returned a few minutes later and parked his car behind ours. The vehicle doors opened and Micky, Zane, Ethan and Jonah exited and headed in our direction. I found it odd that Sarah wasn't with them, but I could ask Micky about that later.

Tyler, Rafe and I got out and we grouped around Rafe's car.

"Looks like no one's home," Micky said, eyes drifted up and down the street, looking for anything coming from anywhere. "Lots of lights but no life."

"What do we want to do?" I asked.

"We have to check it out but we'll have to be careful. Tyler, take Jonah and Ethan around back. Brenda, you and Rafe go through the front door. Zane and I will take the garage." We all nodded agreement and started off to our designated entry points.

Chapter 25: Little House of Horrors

*“There were stairs – they were steep
I was falling, falling deep.
You were there – you were small.
There was screaming down the hall.”*

*Melina Ethridge
“Into the Dark”*

As Rafe and I approached the front door, Rafe pointed out to me a burning cigar lying on the ground. I picked it up and found that it was Michael's brand. It looked as if it had been there ten to fifteen minutes and it was still pretty long. I ripped the butt in half and cupped the lit end in my hand, then motioned Rafe forward.

We both pulled weapons as we neared the door. It was made of paned glass and to my astonishment it was about two inches ajar. Through the glass I checked for booby traps and found nothing. Using the toe of my shoe, I kicked open the door cautiously. The air in the house was absolutely rank, smelling of ruined food and body odor. We had entered the front hall of the house and the living room lay straight ahead. To be blunt, the place was trashed. Clothes and food boxes were everywhere. I walked further in and could see bloodstains on the furniture and carpet. I didn't see any bodies anywhere but my main concern was to find the door that led to the basement.

Rafe and I continued through the house and found Micky and Zane in the kitchen. I found the door to the basement and started down with Rafe right behind me. I heard Micky tell Zane to go with us but didn't stop to wait for him. There was an incredible need to get down there and see if Michael was there. Part of me wanted to kill him with my bare hands but another part, one buried deep down inside of me, wanted to believe that he was a victim in all of this. That somehow he gotten in over his head and needed me to pull him out for a change. I knew I was grasping at straws, but my reality was as delicate as a spider web right now and I needed all the hope I could muster.

As we descended I thought I heard voices and stopped to turn to Rafe and Zane to see if they too heard anything. Rafe mouthed, “radio” and I continued down. We entered what could be considered a family room with a big screen TV and Ping-Pong table.

The smell down here was worse than upstairs. The air reeked of decay and my heart sank because I knew we would probably find bodies down here. The ping-pong table was covered in blood and when I approached the scene I realized there were bits of human tissue and feces on the table as well. With stark realization, I came to understand that a ritual had been performed here.

When I was close enough, I touched the sticky redness on the table to see what I could learn about the person who had probably died there. It told me the blood was human and that it's owner had lost so much of the life giving substance that they had to be either dead or embraced. I hoped it was the former.

I noticed Rafe watching me with a quizzical look on his face. “Taste for Blood,” I whispered, knowing that while I needed to take the time to explain things to him, it was also important to keep our presence to a minimum. If anyone was left in the house, I couldn't give away our location or number. I would consider all situations like this a classroom for him and teach him all that I could. “It is a ritual Tremere perform in order to gain knowledge about a person through their blood. I know this individual was human and that they had little to no blood left in them at the time this blood was spilt.”

He nodded his head in understanding. "Is that all you can learn with the ritual?" he asked softly.

"No. If it were vampire blood I could tell his generation as well." I had already explained generations to him so he nodded his understanding again.

I turned to Zane then and asked him if anyone brought a camera and he produced one from his pocket. I wanted to be able to show the scene to Elvira in hopes that she would have some idea of what kind of ritual had been performed here. "Get pictures of all of this," I said in disgust. How could anyone be so inhuman? I realize that I must drink blood to survive but not at the expense of life itself. I knew I never wanted to follow the Sabbat way of life.

I examined the table further and found a few mystical symbols that reminded me of our Tremere ones but were just different enough that I couldn't recognize them. After pointing them out to Zane I continued my search. The radio we heard coming down the stairs was now playing classical music, but I didn't know which room it was in.

The family room was trashed like the rooms upstairs. On one wall, a target had been spray-painted in red and many shots fired into it. Whoever had been practicing was good, very good. The opposite wall held a similar target but this time the weapons of choice were knives. These weren't as good but still noteworthy. The screen protector of the television was badly cracked and in front of one of the couches, a coffee table and heavy glass punch bowl appeared to have been broken together. The bowl also contained blood and when I again performed the Taste for Blood ritual I learned that it was the same individual's blood from the Ping-Pong table.

Zane worked his way behind me; taking careful photographs so as not to waste a shot, while Rafe remain by my side. There were three doors off this main room and all were shut. I approached the first quietly and listened. Upon hearing nothing, I tried the knob and found it unlocked. I slowly opened the door a bit and was barraged by the smell of death. I opened the door further and realized the room was a walk in closet. A few articles of clothing remained on hangers, but most were slashed and thrown on the floor. The smell was almost overpowering.

Rafe and I both had our gun hands in front of our faces to keep from gagging. I turned to him and used the lit cigar a still had in my hand to try to clear his nasal passages by waving it under his nose. He didn't look like he was going to retch but I didn't want to take the chance anyway. "Stay back and let me check this out," I said and he complied gratefully, taking a few steps back.

I turned to the closet again and began looking for the body I knew was there somewhere. What I found was badly decomposed corpse of a young teenage female. From my limited knowledge, it looked as if she had been dead about two weeks. She had been drained from multiple unhealed bites; one in particular at her neck was very nasty. I backed out from the room and shut the door. Looking at Zane, I swallowed before saying; "There's a body in there."

While listening at the next door, I noticed locks from the outside that were firmly in place and the sound of something dripping inside the room. I almost threw caution to the wind and opened the door without a care as to what was in there. Michael's face ran through my mind along thoughts of him being tortured somewhere in this house but I knew I had to be careful and not endanger the others who were investigating with me. With great resolve, I walked to the next door, leaving the locked room for last.

The door to the third room also had locks on the outside but they weren't engaged. When I opened it, I realized two things, the first being that the radio was in this room. And second that this was where Michael was had been held. It was as if he had tried to keep it

clean. On the floor was a stained single mattress with no sheet. On it was a small bare pillow and thin blanket folded under it. Empty food boxes and milk cartons were stacked neatly against one wall and on another wall, above the mattress, were three sets on chains and shackles, all opened. When I noticed that there was blood on the wall and chains, I dropped the cigar butt on the concrete floor and crushed it out with my shoe.

As I entered the room I detected two distinct scents. The first was George Allen's dirtied unkempt one and the other was faint but definitely Michael. When I recognized his scent, my hand moved to my pocket where I put the ring he had given to me and held it. I didn't know whether to be relieved or worried that he wasn't there.

I was afraid to find out if any of the blood on the wall belonged to Michael but I approached the wall without thought and touched it near the first set of chains. The ritual told me the blood belonged to a human who was down only two or three points. Near the second set was also human but was down to half their capacity, only four or five points. At the last set, my heart sank to find it belonged to a seventh generation vampire that hadn't feed in eight days and was very low. If it were Michael, he only had four point left at the time this sample came to be on the wall.

I hadn't heard any type of gunfire or scuffles above us, so I assumed the house was secured and received evidence of this when I exited the third room and found Ethan just coming off the last step. "Is everything secured?"

"I've got one more room," I said approaching the door I had bypassed before. I didn't bother to be careful but flung the locks open and then the door. Inside was what looked like a husband and wife locked in each other's arms. The wife appeared to have been repeatedly sexually abused and was covered with unhealed bite marks. It looked as if she had been dead only ten to twelve hours. The man's throat had been slit and that was the dripping I had heard earlier.

I knelt next to them and checked the man's pulse on the outside chance he was still alive. I was astonished to find that he was.

"Upstairs is secured. It's disgusting, and no one is left alive." Ethan was in the doorway looking with me.

"Go get Micky," I barked, kneeling now beside the pair. I quickly licked the gash on the man's throat closed and found he contained only four points of blood. I knew I had to do something quickly or the man would die and any knowledge we could hope to gain with him would die. I dropped my fangs to pierce my wrist and held it to the man's mouth. He was unresponsive at first and I massaged his throat to get him to swallow. After a minute, he was drinking himself and I let him take a point of my vitae. I wasn't worried that I would embrace him. He was low on blood, but not drained.

"What's going on?" Micky asked coming into the room and kneeling beside me.

"I've got a live one - barely. He had a gash across his throat. I closed it and gave him a point." I moved over to allow Micky space to see.

"Jesus, this is just like upstairs."

"How many bodies are we talking here?"

"Two upstairs."

"Three down here counting this one."

"Okay, we're missing one. There's a picture upstairs with six. Zane," he called. "Go check again for the missing one." I stood at that point and looked for Rafe. He was just inside the room, watching me.

It looks as if there was a ritual done down here," I explained to Micky.

"Yeah. The bodies are upstairs." Micky was the best person for this situation. His head stayed clear and he always knew what to do, that is of course, as long as Sarah wasn't in danger.

Micky gently removed the woman from her husband's arms and slapped his face to get him to come around. "Wake up, man. Are you okay? Can you tell us what happened here? Come on, man, help us out."

The man stirs and coughs weakly. "Stephanie? Where's Stephanie?"

"Is that your wife?"

"Yes. Is she alright?"

"Yeah, she's fine. What happened here?"

The man told the story of how two weeks ago a nicely dressed gentleman whom I thought to be Roger, the Lasombra, came to the door and sweet-talked his way into the living room. A few minutes later, the rest of the pack entered and took the family hostage. The couple had four daughters and they had all been home at the time. The intruders had killed one of the daughters right away and kept the rest of the family separated. The man said how he had told the girls to do what the intruders wanted so that hopefully they could stay alive. The pack had held someone separate from the family in the room next to this one. The room where Michael had claimed to be.

The man said he and his wife heard loud male screams coming from that room and that after the third or fourth day they must have killed the first person because after that there had been new, different screams.

He also described several rituals he heard being performed in Latin or another language he didn't understand in the room. This second individual escaped at one point but they had caught him and brought him back.

He also told how he heard his daughters and wife scream several times during the two-week period. He also heard what must have been ghouls having fun at some points and in pain at others.

The wife, Stephanie, had been beaten severely the previous night and they had drained her to the point where she died during the day. Fifteen to twenty minutes before we arrived, the Lasombra and another gentleman, from his description it was Michael, came in and Michael had slit his throat. We determined that after he'd been locked in this room, he had only seen a female member of the pack, one of his daughters, and Birkoff who brought food to him and his wife. I held on to the ring in my pocket while he gave vague descriptions of other members of the pack from what he remembered when they had first taken over the house.

I closed my eyes in horror over what had happened here and at Michael's apparent involvement. I tried to again establish the mental link between us. Bastard, I thought, but got no essence of him.

I did however; hear Antonio in my mind, *Brenda? What's going on?*

I have no idea. I left the room and the survivor of this horror to Micky's capable hands. I couldn't stay in the room a second longer. The thought of Michael's presence there was repulsive to me.

Tell me what's going on. Who are you calling a bastard?

A mutual friend of ours. I couldn't even say his name.

Did you find him?

No.

Well, tell me my childe what upsets you so?

His duality. There's something going on here that I just can't put my finger on. I headed for the stairs that led to the first floor.

What do you mean? Antonio asked. I was vaguely aware of Rafe's hand on my arm but I had to retain my concentration to continue the conversation with Antonio. I remove the ring from my pocket and held it.

I contacted him through our special ability and he seemed so like he was. He said he was trying to get to me but he was being held somewhere. He sent me an image of the house and we found it. I continued to give my sire a brief description of what we had found by sending him mental pictures of the house and the bodies we had found.

Dios Mio, was Antonio's reply.

I also told him about finding the husband and wife and that the person who had slit the man's throat was Michael.

Brenda, that does not sound like our boy.

I know it doesn't.

Do you want me to come? he asked.

No. I would not want to worry about you in this situation as well. This is something I have to do by myself. Chris should be here soon. I was worried about her being here as well but I knew because of her situation I had no choice.

I'm not sure I want either of you there right now. Antonio sounded very apprehensive.

We'll be all right. I have friends here. They can protect us if we need it.

You are far from a child.

That's true. I was happy to know my sire had such confidence in me.

Just promise me you'll take care of yourself and your sister. I'm not sure what kind of shape she will be in when she reaches you.

I will.

Have you heard from her?

Not since she left to find Lena.

Me either.

She's a survivor. She'll come back.

I just hope she is in a better frame of mind. Did I tell you that Jason went to Austria?

Oh, really? Shits about to hit the fan, I thought to myself.

Yes, he went with Nina and Cormac.

Well it's something that needs to happen eventually.

Indeed. I'm hoping that Nina and Cormac will be buffers of some sort.

Well, I'm sorry to have bothered you; I must break off now there are hours of the night left that I can search.

I understand.

I will keep you posted.

Thank you. If you hear from Christina,...

I will call you.

We exchanged good-byes and broke the connection. I immediately heard Rafe calling my name, "Brenda? What is going on?" I was on the stair now, heading to the first floor. Rafe was at the bottom, following me up.

"I'm sorry," I said blinking. "What?" Rafe was looking at the hand that I still held Michael's ring in. He finished climbing the steps to where I had stopped, standing one below me.

"What's going on?" he repeated hotly looking in my eyes. I knew he got nervous when he spoke to me and I didn't answer him. I couldn't chastise him for being rude when he was just worried about me.

"I was speaking to my sire."

He rubbed his forehead with his hand and looked at my hand again. "Did you find out anything from the guy downstairs?"

"Like what, the fact that Michael was the one who slit his throat?" My voice caught in the back of my throat and I quickly finished climbing the stairs to enter the kitchen.

Rafe followed and when he reached me again he pulled me into his arms. My rock in a hurricane. I could tell he was upset as well, but he was controlling himself far better than I was. His hands caressed my back and I felt him kiss my hair. "We'll get through this, Brenda," he said softly. "We'll get this all straightened out and we'll deal with him. I can't believe you don't want me to kill the son of a bitch," he added under his breath.

I slipped the ring back in my pocket. I knew it had to be the source of his discomfort. I heard a truck enter the driveway and I look to see people from Caine Security exit. Micky returned to the kitchen at the same time. I pulled away from Rafe as he stopped near us.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said adjusting my jacket collar.

"We missed em." He was rubbing the back of his neck. "That's obvious. The cleanup crew is here, I see. There's not much else we can do so if you want to leave, go ahead."

"Okay. Is Tyler going to stay?"

"Yes. He's doing some Spirit's Touches around the house, trying to see if he can find out what happened here. He can ride back with me."

"Let me know what he finds out." Maybe Tyler's visions could give evidence as to what Michael's involvement was here.

"Sure." We left the house and I asked Rafe to drive to the park just down the road where we found the ring two nights ago. He nodded silently and when we got there, he parked the car and shut off the engine. No one was there, so I got out and began walking to clear my head.

"Brenda, what are you doing?" Rafe asked from my side.

"I need to walk," I said, waving my hands in front of me desperately. "I need to think."

"Can I go with you?" he asked taking my hand.

"Of course." I felt calmer just having that small contact with him. We walked and memories of Michael and how he thinks ran through my mind. What could he possibly hope to gain by being involved with the Sabbat? It's not like he needed money or anything. Maybe someone was impersonating him or had taken his place or something. I was so confused.

We walked through the park until around 4:30 am. Rafe stayed at my side and just lent his presence and of that I was grateful. He never pushed for information that I knew he wanted and probably deserved. He knew what Michael meant to me but I always made sure to let him know how much I loved him. My only hope was that he understood how I felt.

After I had run every possible scenario through my head and had received no real answers, I came to the conclusion that everything would be revealed in time. I finally stopped and turned to Rafe and said, "Do you have any idea how grateful I am to have you in my life?"

He smiled at me. "Not as grateful as I am to have you."

I put my arms around him then and squeezed him gently. He returned the embrace. We stood like that for a time then returned to the Chantry. I was still shaken by what I had seen that night. The horror of the house was still fresh in my mind along with the fact that I had spoken to Michael and still had no answers to show from it. I was feeling the need for

security so when we entered our suite and Rafe showed interest in making love I jumped at the chance. I needed to know there was still good in this world and I found that proof in Rafe's arms.

Chapter 26: Homecoming

*"If you intend to live again,
then open your eyes and don't pretend."
10,000 Maniacs
"If You Intend"*

Rafe was sleeping with me when I awoke the next evening. He was dressed, so apparently he was taking a nap until I rose for the night. I smiled as I slid across the bed and pressed close to him. He stirred and put an arm around me but didn't wake up.

I wasn't achieving the results I wanted so I shifted my weight so I could touch him better. He was wearing a button down dress shirt and blue chinos. I wiggled out from under his arm and used one hand to unbuckle his belt and undo the button and zipper of his pants. He must have been in a deep sleep because he still didn't stir.

It didn't take me long to release what I wanted from his pants and boxers, nor did it take me long to awaken that part of him. He shifted onto his back then and I heard a small moan from the back of his throat. I giggled a little just before I took his member deep into my mouth and sucked long and hard.

That was all he needed. I was watching his face as I moved up and down on him and when his eyes flew open in astonishment as they were drawn to me.

"Oh my God," he cried as his hand moved to cup my head. His breathing had increased while he still slept, but now it sounded as if he had just finished a 5k run. "Brenda..."

I didn't release him to reply but continued on the road I knew would end with his total attention. He bucked wildly and called my name again and again when his release came and I felt a great accomplishment that I had given him so much pleasure.

"Hi," I said when I once again laid at his side. He kissed me soundly as he pulled me to lie across his chest.

"You are so bad," he chuckled, holding me tightly.

"What are you talking about?" I pretended innocence. "You wouldn't wake up so I had to do something."

He chuckled again and kissed the top of my head. "It was a nice wake up call," he replied dryly.

"Maybe next time I'll do this," I said as I commenced with a tickle rampage to his ribs. His laughter was rich and low as he thrashed under me. He rolled the both of us over and tried to pin me down as I tried to get away. We were both laughing breathlessly now and I hoped no one was walking by in the hall.

My cell phone rang then and I had to search for it because I couldn't remember where I had put it. "Hello?" I said panting.

"Brenda?" I recognized my sister's voice.

"Chris?"

"Do you always misplace your phone?" she asked slyly. "Or are you always busy with Rafe?"

"I didn't know where I put it." I was trying to sound innocent again.

"You're lying," she said simply with a tinge of laughter.

"I'm serious."

"You always know where that thing is." Which was true but our clothes had gotten thrown around last night in our hurry to touch each other and I had to find where my jacket had landed. Thinking about it would have made me blush if I could. I glanced over my

shoulder to see that Rafe was just tucking his belt in the last loop. He brought my robe to me and helped me put it on.

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

"What kind of weird shit?" Christina interrupted. Rafe was tying the sash of the robe for me and when he finished he kissed my forehead.

"Michael," was all I said.

"You saw him?" Astonishment was clear in her voice.

I really didn't want to go into this right now with Rafe in the room. I knew Michael was a testy subject for him and I didn't want him to be any more uncomfortable than he already was. "Kind of. Sort of. Not really."

"Gee, that makes the kind of sense that's not," Christina replied dryly.

"I spoke to him in much the same I speak to Antonio."

"Oh, I see. By the way, Antonio said you must teach me that while I'm in Salem."

I was a little confused. I thought Christina already knew how to use the mental link. I guess I was wrong, but whatever Antonio wanted I would do my best to comply. "Okay. No problem."

"What? Don't you think you can teach me?" she teased. "Or don't you want to?"

"I'll try." I don't have much experience in teaching and I wasn't quite sure how good of a job I would do.

"I'm on my way," my sister continued.

"How did everything go?"

"Well, Lena is a mother."

The idea of being a parent had been weighing heavy on my mind lately. I knew that Rafe was throwing away any chance of ever having children by living with me and the thought made me feel a little guilty. That paired with my own feelings of being a mother with no way of having babies tended to leave one feeling a little bereft. "Oh," was all I could manage.

"She wants me to be the Godmother." I could tell she was crying.

"Oh my God, Chris. That's great. A baby," I breathed. At least Christina would have the opportunity to know at least a little of what being a parent could be like and that made me feel a little better. Rafe was beside me, listening and playing with a lock of my hair.

"She's okay," she assured me when I didn't think to ask. "We found her and now she's back with Mikhail."

"That's really great, Chris. At least one of us succeeded."

"Well I wouldn't go that far. I left the Holding rather quickly."

When she didn't elaborate I figured it was a less than perfect encounter. Then she totally surprised me divulging that she was bringing back a ghoul of her own. Apparently she had taken the advice that I had never given to her. "Oh no, Chris. Was it bad with Jason?" Rafe had followed me back to the bed and we both sat on the edge of it then he took me in his arms and I settled back to continue my conversation.

"How did you know Jason was there?" Christina accused.

Damn, I thought. I never told her that Jason would be joining her in the search for their common friend and I had to try to play this off. "Graves sent for him, I guess."

"Yeah? Was that before or after you talked to him in LA?"

"Um, after." I never could lie very well.

My sister's tone turned steely. "What exactly did you say to Jason?"

"Why? What makes you think I said anything?" I asked, attempting to sound innocent.

"Just putting puzzle pieces together. What did you say to him?" Even though Christina and I haven't spent much time together we were able to gage each other really well. I knew I couldn't hold her off for long.

"Well, now see that would be telling," I said playing with the hairs on Rafe's arm.

"Despite appearances, I do not need help with my love life," Christina said ruefully.

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

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

"I highly doubt it," I replied. When I heard Christina sigh I sat up and continued, "I told him that I thought he was the cruelest person in the world because of what he did to you. I also said that I hoped he had more feelings for Lena than he did for you in his black heart so that she could be returned to those who loved her- something I was sure was beyond him now." After I was finished, I settled back into Rafe's arms and he squeezed me to his chest reassuringly.

"Well, ah, reow," she imitated an angry feline. She shocked me when she said, "Well, it's possible Jason could end up in Salem."

"Okay. There are some Nosferatu here."

"Shortly before we found Lena he said that we needed to talk when we got back. And then when we did he disappeared. I just don't know. I couldn't take it. And, did I tell you about Robert?" she added all of a sudden.

"God, don't tell me you're bound to somebody else now."

"Only by blood." Robert turned out to be Christina's brother who just happened to be a mage. When Christina was waiting in the New York airport a man approached her claiming to be a friend of her brother and when she landed in Paris there he was. Christina informed me that Robert knew Graves and had been asked to help locate Lena that was why he was there. I was really happy for her. Christina had so few ties to her past that I knew this meeting could ease her broken heart over Jason Kline.

She wasn't happy about her brother's association with her nemesis Graves and I teased her that maybe they knew each other in another life and that she should be nice to him.

"I would die before I was ever civil to that man. There is no way I could ever feel any different." She was so totally serious I couldn't stop snickering.

"I would laugh if you all were married in another life. And you probably had fourteen children."

"Oh, come on." She scoffed then, "Children. You know that's something neither one of us will ever have."

We both sobered at that point and my thoughts recoiled again. In fact, tears filled my eyes and I broke away from Rafe's arms and crossed the room to stand at the window. "Anyway," Christina continued, unaware of my tears. "So we got Lena back safely and Jason disappeared and I just couldn't stick around, so Robert agreed to get me out of there and I'm on my way to - Brenda? Are you okay?" She must have heard me sob.

"Yeah. I'm fine," I replied, wiping at my eyes.

"It's the whole children thing isn't it?"

"You never think about it until you think about it."

"I know. And when you think about it..."

"It's already too late," I finished.

"I used to think that that was the only regret in my relationship with Jason, that I could never do that for him." Rafe was still on the bed, watching me closely. I am amazed at the

way he could read my body language that early in our relationship. He knew that I needed space and didn't push me. It was endearing.

"Oh," I said in a small voice, not knowing what else to say.

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

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

"Are you talking about Michael?"

"Sometimes," I replied quietly. I didn't want to upset Rafe by talking about Michael right in front of him.

"Rafael is there with you isn't he?"

"Yes."

"Perhaps we should speak of this when I get there."

"I would love that."

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

"And a whole year to do it in. There's probably something I should let you know about what you're walking into."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Sabbat."

"What about them?"

"They're here."

"Oh, yippee."

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

After a moment's hesitation she said in a low voice, "You're not serious."

"I'm quite serious. He talks to me as if they are holding him, then it appears as if he's taken part in the torture of a local family. Then someone who is close to him tried to kill me and almost killed Rafe in the process."

"What?" I felt Rafe come up behind me and slip his arms around my waist. I leaned back into his warmth, grateful for his presence.

"You'll have to tell me all about this when I get there. I know Rafe is there and I don't want to put you in a difficult situation, so we'll talk later."

We talked for a few more minutes and Christina said she would see me the next night. We said our good byes and I turned off my cell phone. After I showered and dressed, I went to Elvira to let her know that Jason might show up in town. She was concerned because she only allowed five members of each clan, save the Tremere, in the city at any given time and Jason's presence would put the Nosferatu Clan over that quota. I told her it was up to her and she said she would take care of it. She also said that she would phone San Francisco to get details about Christina's lost love.

Christina arrived around eight-thirty the next evening. Rafe and I were just coming downstairs when they walked in the front door of the Chantry and I rushed to meet her.

"Christina!" I cried as I gave her a fierce hug that she returned in kind. After a moment I pulled back and held her at arms length to ask, "How are you doing?"

"Better," she smiled. "Better." She looked somewhat tired if that were possible and I once again found myself wishing I could make everything all right for her. I knew I couldn't.

Christina introduced me then to her ghoul. He was a good-looking man, around six feet tall with sandy brown hair that looked like it needed a trim. He had a large duffel bag on one shoulder and a cocky grin that immediately won me over.

"Brenda, this is Frasier O'Connell," my sister started the introduction. "Frasier, this is my sister, Brenda Thompson." I held out my hand and Frasier surprised me by kissing the back of it. Rafe had joined us by then and I looped my arm through his as I smiled up at him.

"This is my new...assistant," I said teasingly. "Rafael Brown." As the three exchanged greetings I took the time to check out Frasier's aura. My sister was sometimes known to leap before she looked and I thought it best to see how sincere this man was. To my absolute surprise his aura was pale, that usually meant that he was Kindred. Had Christina embraced him without telling me or was he pulling some kind of double-cross? Frasier may have been from another world but that didn't mean the Sabbath couldn't get there as easily as Christina and her new friends.

Chris, I said, establishing the mind link. I thought you said you were just ghouling him? I did, why? she thought back.

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

Her head turned quickly to study the man. "What, do I have a booger on my nose?" he whispered at her deep scrutiny.

"I have no idea why his aura is pale, Brenda," she replied. "It wasn't like that when we were in Ramadan." When I looked at his aura again, Frasier appeared worried and confused and totally surprised by our discovery. I was convinced for now that he posed no threat to the clan and suggested that we go in to meet the Prince.

Elvira was in the sitting room with Alden and Micky. I quickly went to her side and kissed the ring on her outstretched hand then whispered in her ear what I knew about Frasier's aura. She studied him intently as I made the introductions. She welcomed them graciously and Alden was quick to offer to help Christina in any way during her stay in Salem. The meeting was over in a matter of minutes but not before it was made clear that Christina was to meet Micky starting tomorrow night to work with him in security. That was their way of helping her keep her mind off Luke Thomas and thus break the blood bond.

Micky walked us out and I asked him in the hallway if it would be possible for us to go over to the house on Elm Street. I knew Rafe and I needed a few more things and I thought Christina might want a few of her things I had sent over earlier. "Of course," he replied. "I'll call the house and arrange for Elijah to be alone for a while. Is half an hour long enough for you to freshen up?" he asked Christina.

"Sure."

I led the way upstairs and stopped to show Christina my suite that was across the hall from hers first. "There's an extra room through that door," I said pointing at the room that had intended to be Rafe's. "If you need to, you can store things there."

Christina noticed the two wrapped presents on the bed in her room right away. "Is it Christmas all ready?" she asked.

"Well, a couple of them rolled into one," I replied with a smile.

She loved the new laptop and Frasier was impressed with the sword. Bruce had helped pick it out and told me Frasier would need it balanced for proper use. When I mentioned my adopted child's advice Christina asked how he was adjusting.

"Wonderfully," I said.

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

"Elvira did mention something about that," I replied. "At least Frasier hasn't been in the ground for a thousand years." That had been a great challenge with Bruce, how to explain things so he understood. He'd had no concept about running water much less computers or the Internet. Christina was lucky that Frasier came from a technologically advanced society.

I called to have a van pulled around because Christina had said something about bringing a trunk back with us and I didn't think it would fit in the trunk of Rafe's Contour.

Chapter 27: Will You?

*"You are before me, sweet man,
and I am thinking
aren't I supposed to give up
everything?"*

Jewel

"Second Thoughts in Columbus, Ohio"

Christina remembered the house, even though some of those memories were of the dungeon and when Beth had held her there. When we arrived I directed her and Frasier to the room where I had her things dropped off while I went into the living room.

The thought had occurred to me earlier that if there were werewolves staying in my house that maybe it wasn't such a good idea to leave my 'family' pictures out for all to see. Micky had assured me that the Lupines wouldn't know they were house sitting for a Kindred but just in case the secret was let out I didn't want pictorial evidence left out to make a hit list. Besides, I wanted the memories of those I loved to be with me at the Chantry while we stayed there.

"What are you doing?" Rafe asked behind me. I had thought he'd gone upstairs with Christina and Frasier.

"I wanted to bring these back with us," I said. I had just gathered up the last frame in my arms and was reaching for the drawer knob when I saw a look of concern cross Rafe's face. He knew that the picture of Michael was the only thing held in that drawer and I figured he thought I meant to take it with me and didn't like the idea. I smiled a little inside at his obvious distress. I didn't plan on taking the picture with me, just put it somewhere safe. "Ready to go up?" I asked. Rafe only nodded and followed me to our room.

I dropped the frames on the bed when we entered and quickly shuffled through them to pull out Michael's picture. Rafe was standing by the fireplace, studying my movements. He hadn't said anything on the way upstairs and I knew he was watching to see what I did with the frame, if I put it in the bag he'd pulled out with the others or if I left it behind. I had no intention of taking it with me; I only wanted to have the identity of *all* my family and friends safely away from the werewolves. Even Michael.

I took the picture of my lost love and put it in a dresser drawer in the bathroom and saw the intense relief that rushed over Rafe. He felt secure again. I felt he had nothing to worry about.

"Do you have anything you needed to pick up before we go?" I asked.

He smiled as he crossed the room and swept me off the floor and into his strong arms. "No, I've got all I need right here."

I laughed as I put my arms around his neck and kissed him. I understood he needed to feel secure and I also know that he was what I needed, now more than ever. He was constant and sure and meant the world to me. The kiss deepened quickly and I knew where it was leading. "Wait a minute," I said breathlessly, pulling back. He was breathing hard, too.

"It only takes a minute," he said breathlessly, claiming my mouth again. His tongue was lapping at my lips, easing them apart again then entering to slide along my own.

A small cry slipped from my throat as I broke away again and rested my forehead against his. "You're incorrigible."

"You're the tempting one," he threw back with a throaty laugh.

"I am?"

"Yes, you are." His head moved to kiss me again but I pulled back and pushed on his chest. Reluctantly, he returned my feet to the floor but still held me close.

"Do you need to pick up any *clothing*?" When he started to reach for my shirt, I stepped back from him and pushed his hands away, laughing. "And not my blouse, either."

He looked oppressed, "I guess I could pick up a few things. Razors and stuff." He went to the bathroom and when he passed, I pinched his butt. He turned to me and pointed his finger at me. "Hey, I thought we weren't going there."

"I wasn't," I replied innocently. "I was making sure that we put a period on the sentence."

"I thought you weren't bothered by those anymore?" he asked ironically. I turned and left without another word.

When we got back to our rooms at the Chantry, we started pulling out the things we had brought back with us to put them away. I unpacked my picture frames and put them on the dresser, remembering Rafe's unease about Michael.

"You were quiet earlier at the house," I remarked.

"I'm quiet sometimes," Rafe commented. I think he knew where I was going and didn't want to make the discussion easy.

"I've noticed. Is everything okay?"

"It's not okay for me to be quiet sometimes?"

"That's fine, but I've noticed that the times you've been quiet are odd." He was trying to act as if he had no idea what I was talking about. "Did you take Drama in school?" I asked.

"What?" I had unsettled him.

"Did you act in school?"

"I was in a play or two, why?"

"You're not doing a very good job of it."

He laughed as he came to me and pulled me in his arms. "It's just been really stressful this last week or so. There's been a lot going on and sometimes I just think about things."

"Like..." I prodded.

"Things." I didn't like his answer so I put my arms around his waist and dropped my hands to his buttocks to give them a quick squeeze. He smiled, "I thought you were supposed to go over and talk to Christina, this is not the way to do it."

"Well, I wanted to take a few minutes to talk to you first."

"What do you want to talk about?"

"Rafael Scott Brown."

"Brenda Marie Thompson." We stood in silence for a minute before he continued.

"Sometimes with all the stuff that's going on I ... I don't know how to explain it. I think about things and I just - I don't want you to think that you've made the wrong choice."

"Don't doubt how important you are to me," I said imploringly. Didn't he understand that yet? Didn't he know that I would give my life for him?

"I don't doubt that I'm important to you but I know that other people were important to you in the past and I sometimes wonder if they won't be important to you again."

I knew he was talking about Michael, it was very obvious. "I'm going to remind you again of what I told you that night in the basement, remember?"

"I know that Michael's not here, but he is in town and he wants back in your life."

"Possession is nine tenths of the law."

He laughed then and pulled me closer, "Then I guess, legally, you're mine. Well not quite legally, but maybe someday."

I froze for at least thirty seconds then pulled away from his chest and looked deep in his eyes, astonished. "What?" he asked.

"What are you talking about?"

"Nothing," he said quickly. His cheeks were pink with embarrassment.

"Rafe," I said, threateningly.

"What?" he repeated.

"God, don't make me pull this out of you."

"Well, we really haven't known each other that long and ... I don't know. I just liked the way Mrs. Brown sounded the other night. I-I liked it." He was playing with a lock of my hair and making sure he avoided my eyes.

"Oh my God," I breathed before I realized I was speaking. "I never would have gone there." His hand dropped and his face went slack. He took a step back and I realized I said the wrong thing. I stepped with him, not letting him pull away. "What I mean is... It's just something that I never thought any of my kind would do that." I knew it sounded lame, but I was too stunned to be witty.

"Vampires don't get married?" He sounded as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

"Not that I know of, but maybe I don't know something. That would be kinda cool. What would, like, a hundred-year anniversary be? What would you do? Would that be platinum?" I was babbling, but I couldn't help it. The idea was appealing even if it sounded strange. Did Micky and Sarah have thoughts like this?

Rafe laughed uncomfortably. "You know, your sister is probably expecting you."

"Okay," I mumbled, lost in thought.

"Christina is probably waiting for you. You know, Chris? Across the hall?"

"What? I'm sorry."

"You know the chick across the hall with the big guy? You know."

"Right."

"She's probably waiting for you, it's been ten minutes, you said five."

I stood on tiptoe and kissed his full lips, "Thank you."

"For what?"

"You made my night."

"By reminding you your sister was waiting for you?"

"No, I don't think that's what it was," I said as I turned and left the room.

When Rafe and I returned to our suite I undressed methodically for bed, my thoughts had again returned to the half proposal of marriage from him earlier that night. Was he serious? I wanted to ask him about so badly that I was almost bursting with anticipation. "What do you think of Frasier?" I asked, trying to avoid the question that threatened to escape my lips as I put my dirty clothes away.

"He seems nice." Rafe sounded sincere and much to my dismay, he looked as if he had totally forgotten the conversation we had only a few hours ago. "He's very funny," he said with a grin. His calm was going to be my undoing.

"He is," I agreed. "Did you have any problems with the Sega?" I had to bite my lip to keep the other question in my mind from being blurted out.

"No. Not at all." He was putting away his clothes, too.

"Did you like Chris?" I was trying to keep my tone and the conversation even but I had no idea how I was doing. My mind was a buzz. I did want him to have a good relationship with my sister and her ghoul. After all, we were going to be together for the next year. It seemed a good, neutral topic to talk about.

"Of course I do. She's great." He glanced at me briefly as I bent to retrieve my shoes from the floor where I had kicked them off.

"Were you serious about asking me to marry you?" I blurted out, shoes in hand and desperation on my face. I had tried not to ask but curiosity got the better of me.

"Yes," he replied nonchalantly as he entered the bathroom. I had no idea how he could be so calm. I felt rooted in place, my limbs were heavy and I had made no move to put away the pair of shoes I still held in my hands.

When Rafe entered the room again he asked, "Did she get settled in okay?" How could he be talking about Christina at a time like this? I wanted to scream.

"Yes," I said weakly, still not moving. Hello - elaborate, please, I barely stopped myself from adding.

Rafe must have noticed then that I hadn't moved for a minute or two and came to stand in front of me. Waving a hand in front of my face, he said, "Brenda." I looked at him imploringly but all he did was take the shoes from my hands and put them away himself. That done, he stood beside the bed and said, "It's getting late. Are you coming to bed?"

"No." I wanted to grab him and shake some sense into him.

"No," he repeated, a sly smile appearing on his lips. "You want to do something else?" he suggested, moving toward me and taking my hand.

"No," I sounded desperate and I hated the effect this was having on me. I was weak and I knew, given enough prodding, I would do whatever he wanted. I felt as if I was the one blood bonded and not him. "I want to talk about this," I ended weakly.

"About what?" He was pulling me to the bed. When we got there, he sat down and I stood between his legs.

"You know what," I said looking down at him and I could tell he knew what I was talking about. Again, the hesitation. His eyes were the clearest green I had ever seen and I longed for the time when I would know what every color variation meant. What did he do when he was nervous or expectant. Would he pace or chew his nails?

After a moment, Rafe took a deep breath and asked, "Is there something wrong with it?" He was as desperate for answers now as I had been when we entered the room. I dropped to my knees in front of him and regarded him evenly.

"I don't know," I said reaching up to touch his cheek. His hand came up to cover mine. "I've heard of Kindred being together for a long time, but as far as actual marriage, no. It's not something I have ever heard of."

"You've never heard of Kindred marrying Kindred, but what about Kindred marrying ghouls?" He naturally thought I had all the answers, but to this I was clueless.

"Neither," I said simply.

"Is there someone you can ask?"

I smiled at his trust. "I'll talk to Micky tomorrow."

"Okay," he said looking at the clock. "Ten minutes. Do you want to talk more or do you want to go to sleep?"

My smile widened as I reached over and shut off the light.

Chapter 28: Where Are You, My Love?

*"There's desperation in the air
it leaves a stain on all your clothes
and no detergent gets it out."*

Meatloaf

"Life is a Lemon and I Want My Money Back"

Rafe was on the bed when I awoke and I turned over to find a smile on his face. "Hi," I said.

"Hey." He leaned over to give me a quick kiss of the mouth. "Sleep well?"

"Like the dead," I replied dryly. "What did you do today?"

"Hung out with Frasier," he said lying beside me. "He's pretty amazing. Hey, I heard the group that Christina was with in Austria is coming here."

"Really? I wonder if Jason is with them."

"I don't know. I heard there was at least one woman and the rest were men."

"Wow, that would be great if he came for her."

"Yeah." He was studying me intently, desire quite apparent in those green eyes. I leaned forward and kissed him and his hand cupped the back of my neck to deepen it. He rolled over on top of me and began to kiss a trail across my face to my ear lobe. One thing led to another and later, when we were done, Rafe suggested I get dressed because Christina would be looking for me before going off with Micky.

I was just getting into the shower when Rafe stuck his head in the door to the bedroom. "I'm going to go get something to eat with Frasier," he said.

"Okay." I went to the door and planted a quick kiss to his lips. "Come back to me," I told him passionately.

"Brenda," he began with a laugh, "I'm just going across that hall."

"I know." I shook my head quickly and kissed him again before he shut the door. I showered quickly and was just pulling on my robe when the bathroom went black. Blindly, I made my way to the bedroom and found it too had lost its lighting. I groped for the gun I had put in the nightstand the previous morning and prepared to exit when I heard gunfire coming from the front of the chantry. It sounded heated, but I was more concerned about Christina and Rafe.

I barely made it to the door of my suite when the lights came back on. I continued out into the hall and across to the door to my sister's suite. The door opened as I neared and Frasier stuck his head out. He looked very distressed about something, which struck me as funny because Christina had led me to believe he was a seasoned fighter. "Is everyone okay in there?" I asked.

"Something very weird is going on," he said between clenched teeth. He was looking up and down the hall as if he expected a specter of some kind to appear at any moment. I also noticed he held a very large handgun in his left hand that looked as if it had been modified in some way.

"What are you talking about?" I was beginning to feel alarmed. Where were Christina and Rafe?

"Come in here." He reached out with his right hand and grabbed my upper arm to pull me into the room. I heard the door close behind me, but I only felt relief to see Rafe standing across the room. He was dressed different, which confused me further, and he was visibly upset.

"Did you change your clothes after I got into the shower?" I asked as I started to cross the room to him.

"Brenda, where the hell are we? What's going on?" I stopped dead in my tracks. I didn't know what was going on, Rafe was speaking with a Spanish accent. Was he playing a trick or something?

"What do you mean, what's going on?" I glanced at Frasier, but his expression had turned from alarm to almost anguish. "We're at the chantry."

"The what?" I took a few more steps closer to him. He looked even more confused than before and I now noticed his mustache and goatee were gone.

"Did you shave too?" I was only about six feet from him now.

"What are you talking about? Where the hell are we?"

"Rafe." A tone of desperation entered my voice. What was going on around here?

"We heard a noise outside," Frasier said from behind me. I turned to listen to his explanation. "And the three of us went to check it out. There was this car down there and the guys down front were firing at the car. I went in to get my gun and when I came back, Christina was gone and Rafe was like this."

I didn't understand what was happening. I had a firm hold on my emotions but I knew at any moment my control could snap. "Where is Christina?" I asked very slowly.

"You tell me," Frasier sounded lost. I knew the blood bond between him and Christina was complete and I understood his reaction. I turned back to Rafe and closed the remaining few feet that separated us. When I stood in front of him I touched his face and studied his eyes, looking for answers that I hoped were there.

He jumped when my fingers came into contact with his skin. "Jesus you're cold. What did you do, go outside?"

That was all I needed to know. I dropped my hand and took a step back. I could feel my face and heart harden as I continued to take him in. "Who are you and what are you doing here?" My tone was the harshest I had ever heard it. I was beginning to feel violated again, like when we found the cameras and listening devices at my house.

"Brenda, you know me." His hands flashed in front of him in rapid tension. "You've known me for years. I live right next door to you."

"I have not known you for years, I've known you for two weeks."

"Hello. I live in the same duplex as you do."

"I don't live in a duplex."

"I don't know what drugs you're taking, Brenda, but we live on the same street in Nashville. You live on one side of the duplex and I live on the other. We've lived there for three years and I've known you for four."

"You're not in Nashville," I turned to the other man in the room. "Frasier, go get Elvira or Micky, I don't care which, whoever you find first."

"Okay. Do you have any idea where Christina is?"

"No, but I'm going to find out."

"Okay," he holstered his weapon and left the room. The tight control I was keeping on my emotions failed me and I felt tears well up in my eyes and my shoulders begin to shake. My hands went immediately to my face to cover the blood tracks I knew would soon streak my face. I had no control over the situation and I didn't know what to do or what the hell happened to Christina or Rafe, but I knew I would get them back. At the core of this, I felt Michael.

"Brenda, what is the matter? You know me." His tone was pleading. He sounded like he felt concerned for my well being but I couldn't help but feel put off by his mere presence. I

felt him come up beside me and as he tried to place a reassuring hand on my shoulder, I backed away and dropped the hand that covered my tear stained face. I raised the gun in my hand.

"Who put you up to this?" I asked coldly.

I backed up even as he was making his way forward. "What the fuck happened to you?" he asked vehemently.

"Nothing. What have you done with my Rafe?"

"Jesus, you're a vampire and nothing happened to you?"

"Yeah. That's regardless-"

"It was the Spaniard wasn't it? I told you to stay away from him."

Who in the hell was The Spaniard? And what did he have to do with me being a vampire? Maybe he was talking about Antonio, he was Spanish, but I had never heard of anyone call him The Spaniard. "Who are you talking about?" I was so confused my head was spinning.

"This is so weird. I was in my living room, listening to the radio and then I'm on this balcony with a gunfight going on below me. Will you tell me what the hell is going on?"

"You were suppose to be - no, no -" I stumbled. Then I stopped to regroup my thoughts. "Rafe was suppose to get something to eat with Frasier. Christina -"

"Was that the guy that was in here? Christina? What the hell would she be doing here?" So he did know something about the people that should have been here. I had to keep my cool so I could get the information out of him that I needed.

"She's my sister," I said, studying his reaction.

"It was The Spaniard, wasn't it? When did this happen? I just saw you two nights ago."

"I just saw you five minutes ago." Here came the ultimate test. "Did the same people get a hold of him that got Michael?"

"Where's Michael?" His tone was too even to be my Rafe. He sounded concerned about the other man's well being, not what Rafe usually felt about Michael.

"I have no idea. I suppose you know him, too."

"Yeah," he replied, incredulously. Then came the bomb. "He lives next door with you."

That knowledge was more than I could handle right now. I was absolutely stunned. Michael and I together? And the knowledge coming from Rafe? What kind of game was this guy playing? I needed time to regroup my thoughts. I went to the closed door that led to the hallway and opened it, looking for the familiar face of Elvira or Micky coming to help me keep my sanity.

What I got was an entire group of people heading toward me. Micky, Bruce, Frasier, and Jason Kline, along with a woman and two men I didn't know came up to the door I clung to like a lifeline. I only really saw Micky and Bruce for the moment. Normally, the knowledge of Jason being here would have brought relief to me for Christina's sake, but now she was missing and so was my lover. I had no other eyes right now.

Upon seeing blood on my face, Bruce came immediately to my side, concern printed plainly on his face. Micky looked troubled as well and asked, "Brenda, what's wrong?"

"Micky, get in here. Something is really wrong." I opened the door wide enough to let him and Frasier in and they entered. I closed the door soundly behind them, not taking the time to respond to Bruce or take in the newcomers in the hall. I turned and found that the man who looked like my ghoul had retreated to the corner of the room where a table and four chairs stood close to a window.

No sooner had I closed the door then it opened again. "We need a minute," I said blindly and promptly slammed it shut again. Whoever it was that wanted in was persistent and the door opened yet again. "We need a minute," I hissed through clenched teeth and slammed the door again, even harder this time.

"That guy is hell bent," I heard Micky say behind me as I slammed the door shut a second time. "What's going on?"

My self-control was almost nil at that point. I waved the Glock that I still had in my left hand and said almost hysterically; "Do you see anything different about him? That is not Rafe. Christina is gone."

"What do you mean?" Micky was stunned. "Where did she go?"

"I don't know." Tears started in my eyes again. "You need to talk to him because he thinks he knows me."

"I do know you, Brenda," the man across the room said.

"It's not right, Micky," I said shaky.

"I live in Nashville," Rafe started his story again. "And Brenda and Michael live next door..." If I had to hear the whole thing a second time I was going to scream.

"You're not in Nashville," I repeated.

"Where am I?" His tone signified that he was beginning to believe something that couldn't be real.

I was finally beginning to get a hold of myself. "You're in Salem, Massachusetts. Look out that window, do you see anything that looks like Nashville?" I knew he would be able to hear the ocean from that window and that alone would be a tell-tale sign. His face slackened.

"Jesus, what happened?" His reaction seemed conducive to someone who didn't know what was going on around him. Unfortunately, my wits weren't about me, or I would have thought to check his aura. Micky could tell I was upset so he came to my side and sat me on a couch that dominated one wall of the room, across from where this Rafe looked out the window.

"Just chill," he told me, calmly. "Let me talk to him. We'll figure this out." Micky then turned to Frasier and asked him what happened. Frasier reviewed the events again for Micky, giving him quick and concise descriptions.

"Sounds like Akari did some kind of ritual that may have switched the two of them," Micky said when Frasier had finished. To himself he asked, "Where's Christina?" Then to Rafe he asked, "Do you know Christina Strong?"

"Christina is dead," Rafe said simply.

Chapter 29: New Arrivals

*"Fine place for a day full of breakdowns"
Stone Temple Pilots
"Meatplow"*

I felt as if someone slammed me in the chest. Christina was dead? How? Who? I looked to Frasier and saw that he was as shocked as I was. The door to the room flew open and Jason entered, his eyes were glowing red like an animal's in a headlight beam at night. He quickly took a look around the room and immediately shrieked back from something, falling to the floor and covering his face with his trench coat.

The beautiful Hispanic woman I saw earlier popped her head in from the hall and I got to my feet. That must be Nina Rodriguez, I thought to myself, thinking of the Tremere Clan member Christina had told me about. I was about to greet the woman, but she quickly moved back into the hallway. A second later, a man dressed like a priest entered the room and left as fast as Nina had. He must be Cormac's nephew, Stephen, I thought, trying to understand the strange behavior of these newcomers.

My head was swimming with the knowledge that Christina and Rafe were missing and the strange behavior of these two people wasn't helping my frame of mind. The last man who came into the room headed straight to the opposite wall. He stopped in front of me and introduced himself quickly. "You must be Christina's sister. I am Cormac," he said and shook my hand, then continued to the wall and removed a large mirror that hung there and put it on the floor, reflection side to the wall.

"Do you not like the mirror?" Micky asked ironically, having watched the scene from where he still stood close to our other world visitor.

"My nephew has a deformity," Cormac explained. "It would be best left unseen." Christina was right, this man used few words to get his point across. Micky simply nodded as if he understood what Cormac was talking about, even though I didn't, and returned his attention to Rafe. The priest, Stephen, entered the room again and went to stand quietly next to his uncle.

Rafe looked tense at the arrival of the newcomers and Frasier was about to bounce out of his skin with worry over his new mistress. He was pacing back and forth in much the same way I had seen Christina pace many times before. I was back in control of my senses and I knew there were questions to be answered.

"Okay," I said approaching Rafe again. "Let's sit down and talk about this. There has to be a rational explanation." I indicated the table that Rafe still stood next to and he sat, gratefully. "Frasier," I said turning my attention to him, "I understand how you're feeling. I feel the same way."

"No, you don't," he said, but sat on the trunk at the end of Christina's bed and fidgeted with a string that hung from his pant leg.

Rafe seemed to be taking in everything. "What is this a freaking convention?"

"What are you talking about?" I asked taking a chair across from him. Micky moved to stand behind me.

He pointed around the room as he spoke. "Vampire, vampire, vampire, - and that's a werewolf," he said when he reached Stephen.

"Glad to see you have the same abilities," I said with a slight smile, filing the information of what the priest was way in my mind then turning my attention to Micky accusingly.

"I knew he was coming," he told me before I could say anything. "Sorry, I forgot to tell you."

"Where's Elvira?" I asked.

"I'll go find her," Bruce offered and left the room post haste. I was vaguely aware of Cormac moving about the room while Jason was still cowering in his trench coat. When Cormac reached the bedside table, I noticed that he picked something up and held it for a while, then placed it in the table's drawer. After that, Jason rose nonchalantly and shook his coat lapels to resettle the garment on his shoulders.

"Tell us everything that happened before you ended up here," I said, giving Rafe my full attention.

"What, from when I was born or what?" His voice had a cocky edge I hadn't ever heard out of my Rafe.

Jason came forward and said menacingly through clenched teeth, "Tell her what she wants to know."

"Hey, I'm trying to get a starting point. What a month ago? Two weeks? Five minutes?"

"Five minutes."

"I was in my living room listening to music with my headphones. Then I was on a balcony. This guy, Frasier came out and asked me where Christina was."

"Did you feel anything funny?" I asked. "Did you see anything?"

"The Rafe that's suppose to be here," he replied, uncomfortably, "you and him are..." he trailed off hesitantly.

"Yes." My voice was low and full of emotion. I knew I had to keep as much of my feelings hidden as possible. Excess emotions only tended to make high stress situation worse and I knew that wouldn't help to find Rafe and Christina.

"Hmm." He looked away for a moment and when he returned his eyes to mine he asked, "Is Sam alive?" By his tone I could tell that something had to have happened to Samantha in his world and that it wasn't good.

"Yes. Why wouldn't she be?"

He ignored my question and asked another of his own. "And he's not gay?" I could only think that he referred to my Rafe.

"He's kind of both," I said lowly, not really wanting to discuss this in front of anyone. Rafe's sexual tendencies were his own even though I was talking to his double.

He seemed to take everything in stride. "So, why is Jason on the other side?" He nodded to the man my sister loved more than anyone else.

"Who said we were good or bad?" I asked astonished. How much did he know about my kind in his world, I wondered.

"You've told me that quite often." He sounded familiar still, like the Rafe I knew and loved, but he lacked the quality in his tone when you talked about someone you loved.

"And so has he," Rafe nodded his head toward Jason. It was beginning to bother me that he kept referring to me as the Brenda he knew but I pushed the nagging aside, knowing the need for knowledge was more important than my agitation.

"Do you know him?" I asked.

"Yeah," he said with a tug of irony. "He taught you to hunt. He was your friend but he is dead now." His face was sober now.

"I hunted long ago," Jason said lowly and to himself. He was close to my side, intent as I was on the circumstances Rafe was laying out before us. I had no knowledge of him ever hunting, but at least his past linked with our alternate selves somewhat, unlike mine.

My head was swimming with unasked questions. Who killed Christina? What circumstances led to the other me to become a hunter? How did I meet Jason? No matter how badly I wanted answers to my questions I knew I would have to wait, if I even got a chance to ask them. Hopefully, Elvira knew of some ritual that would put everything right again because I knew that I couldn't handle losing Rafe so soon after finding him, not to mention what losing Christina would mean.

"Do you hunt as well?" I asked Rafe.

"Oh, no. I just live next door. You're the one with a license."

"For what?"

"To kill vampires," he said matter-of-factly.

"What is the government in on this?" Jason asked disbelievingly.

Rafe blinked and looked at Jason as if he should know the answer. "Yes, for several years now."

I glanced to Micky, not sure whether to believe what I was hearing. "What happened to the Masquerade?" I asked. Micky simply shrugged his shoulders, as confused as I was.

"Why don't we all go to the library or something?" Jason suggested. "That way maybe we can come up with a way to put everything right." I regarded him for a moment, relieved at the concern I found in his features. I knew then that he loved or at least had strong feelings for Christina just by the way he held himself. He was tense all over, ready to snap or jump at the slightest provocation. I prayed we got her back for his sake.

"Good idea," I said, standing. "Let's wait for Elvira and then go downstairs."

I glanced to the doorway just in time to see the Prince of Salem arrive. She really is a regal woman, tall and stately. Stephen, the Lupine priest stood in the doorway, unaware that someone had come up behind him. "Excuse me," she said coolly. Stephen jumped a little and moved to the side, muttering a low apology. She entered the room, Bruce a step behind, then and studied the newcomers for a moment. "When did you arrive?" she asked no one in particular.

"Just a few minutes ago," Nina replied.

"Somebody want to explain?" Her attention now rested on Micky and myself.

"My Prince," I started, "through means by which we have no idea, it seems as if there has been some sort of shifting going on here. This person is not the Rafael Brown we know."

"Shifting, huh?" Her tone was even as she took in the room and all those in it.

"Yes. And Christina is gone as well."

"She went where?"

"I think she must have shifted, too. Rafe said that in his world she is dead. So if there's no one for her to switch with that would explain why there isn't a version of her here." It was the only thing that made sense.

"Who killed Christina?" Cormac asked as he approached the table. When he got close, Rafe stiffened and made to rise. Cormac must have understood his apprehension and stopped.

Rafe didn't verbally answer the question, but looked at me evenly. It took only a few seconds for the realization to dawn on me. Of course, it all made sense now. In the other world I was a hunter and it would stand to reason that if Christina was dead it was me who killed her. It was a hard fact for me to face. Christina and I may not have the closest relationship but I knew I would give my life for her, just like I would for Elvira or Micky or Rafe. They are my family and I would do anything to insure the safety of any of them. "Can we do this?" I asked Elvira. "Can we bring them back?"

"There is nothing in the library but I have heard of it. I can see where Akari would use it."

"Where can we find the ritual?"

"We'd have to find Akari," she said simply.

"Give me five minutes to change," I said as I nodded to her and left quickly, going across the hall to the room I had shared with Rafe. I pulled on the first pair of pants and shirt I could find. My hair was almost dry now and I pulled it back in a high ponytail on the top of my head. I saw Rafe's jacket still hung on the back of a chair in the room and I slipped it on, needing the slight comfort it afforded. I didn't see his guns and holsters anywhere so I assumed that he had them on his person.

I opened my door in just under the five minutes I allotted myself and found Nina coming down the hall. She was coming from the direction of the stairs, so I thought she must have went to the main floor for something.

"I was sent to get the others," she said. "There's been a delivery." My heart sank. Please no more roses, I thought to myself.

"For who?" I asked.

"I'm not sure." She seemed like a really nice person and I hoped that I would get the opportunity to get to know her after this whole mess was settled.

We reentered Christina's room to find Jason on the floor where he appeared to be meditating. Stephen and Cormac were standing by a bedside table. I saw Stephen pick up a frame that held a picture of Jason and in a blink of an eye they both disappeared.

I was shocked. And just as I was about to say something, they reappeared and Stephen returned the frame to the table.

"Micky, what in the hell's going on in here?" I asked none too nicely. "Some kind of guru meeting?" I couldn't believe what I was seeing. I couldn't believe they would come into a Chantry they hadn't been to before and just begin to rearrange things and disappear like they'd been born here. This was utter insanity.

"There is something hanging around Jason that he can kind of see and now Cormac can, too," Micky explained. "Use Auspex."

At this point I was too upset to try. Then I remembered that this Rafe shared the ability to tell supernatural creatures so I went to his alternate's side and dropped to my haunches next to him. "What do you see?" I asked.

"It's a ghost," he said simply as he squinted as if to get a better look. "It's Christina and she's really pissed."

"What is she doing?"

"Running from him," he said, indicating Cormac. I looked up as he asked Nina to step into the hallway and opened the drawer to pull out Christina's cross. Again I was amazed at the liberties this man thought he could take with other people's things, especially Christina's things. Then they disappeared again.

All of a sudden I saw Jason fall onto his back as if he had been pushed. I went to his side and asked if he was all right.

"Yeah," he said with a cough as I helped him to his feet. He was visibly shaken and I pulled him to a chair for him to sit as Cormac and Stephen appeared again. Cormac was off balance and fell to one knee, catching himself with the hand that still held Christina's cross.

"What in the hell is going on?" I demanded.

"Yes, please share," Micky added.

Cormac rose slowly and settled his jacket on his shoulders. Frasier seemed to realize that someone was touching his mistress' possessions and he jumped to his feet.

"What the hell are you doing with her stuff?" he demanded harshly.

"That was not our Christina," Cormac replied calmly.

"Yeah, well that's my Christina's stuff and I don't think you need to have your fingers on it." Frasier looked like he was about to be pushed over the edge and I could tell that Jason hadn't liked Frasier's possessiveness over my sister. In fact, when I looked at him his eyes were glowing red again and there were claws extending from each of his fingers.

Frasier saw this as well and pulled his gun from its holster and held it at his side.

"Okay," I said raising my hands to stop an attack before it happened, "There's some sort of delivery downstairs. Can we get out of this room please?"

"Yeah, let's go downstairs," Micky suggested and gestured for Rafe to move forward. "He seems to connect with you best," he said and I took the hint that I would be responsible for him.

"Do we want to let him be out and about?"

"As long as someone is with him," he said pointedly. "I don't think he should leave the house."

I nodded my head in agreement as I noticed Jason's claws retracting as he stood, glaring at Frasier who had holstered his weapon. We made our way downstairs then and found a large framed mirror standing in the hall. Written in French on the mirror in blood was a message geared toward Bruce and signed R.C. It said for him to be at the park at midnight or that the girl, and I took it to be Bruce's mortal descendant Rachel Black, would suffer if he didn't. Elvira and Bruce were in the hall waiting and he was talking to someone on his cell phone.

They told us that they didn't know whom the mirror was from but that a woman driving a U-Haul truck delivered it. From the description Jax gave us it sounded like Michael's new girl.

"Sounds like Vivian," I said to Elvira, feeling a little better about the situation. At least now I had something to do. Giving Cormac, Nina, Brother Stephen and Jason the information on what had been happening was like an eye in the storm.

"That means Michael," she replied.

"Michael?" Jason asked.

"Yes," I said turning to him. "You remember Michael." They had both been involved in the chain of events that led to Elvira's takeover of Salem.

"Yeah," he half-laughed. "Smart ass. What's he got to do with anything?"

"Well, for some time now he's been involved with a Sabbat pack that's causing trouble in town. I don't know how long he's been with them."

"Are you talking about Michael Moorecock?" the alternate Rafe asked. "Don't tell me he's a vamp, too?"

"Yes," I replied.

"For a while now," Jason interjected. I noticed Cormac approaching the mirror and saw him lay his hand on its frame. His eyes closed and from his stance I figured he was attempting to do a Spirit's Touch on it to see what he could learn.

"Oh, this is too weird," I heard Rafe say but I was now interested in what information Cormac was getting via his touch on the mirror. When he was finished he described the pictures he'd received from his viewings. The most important being that it was Roger Campbell that had written on the mirror and that Michael and his two ghouls, Vivian and Birkoff that put it into the van that brought it here. The evidence of Michael's involvement with the pack was growing by leaps and bounds every day and what little hope I had of helping him was dwindling past the point of me being able to do anything for him.

To bring the newcomers up to date, Elvira quickly reviewed the events that had taken place over the last week. Including the fact that Roger was a Lasombra and that Vivian had lived in Salem and was at one time a member of the Black Rose Coven.

I was anxious to get to the park and we all agreed to get there early, hoping to set a trap. Micky and Sarah were staying behind, he was waiting for some information to come in from one of his contacts but they said they would come by the park around the time of the meeting. Rafe was also staying behind with Elvira in hopes of giving her information that could help in bringing back Christina and the other Rafe.

We left the house within twenty minutes, taking one of the Chantry's limousines. On the way, I told them what I knew about the pack. "There's one Lasombra for sure," I said referring to Roger as I looked around the group of people I didn't know except from what Christina had told me. The only person present I knew I could trust was Bruce and that made me feel better. Everything would be all right; it had to. "There's a Tremere with them as well as Michael Moorecock, he's Venture. There's at least a couple others but I don't know their clans." I didn't tell them that Akari was Elvira's childe. It wasn't important to them, they didn't need to know.

"There is a shapeshifter with them as well," Cormac added. I looked at him in surprise but he didn't offer an explanation and I didn't ask. If there were indeed a shapeshifter among them the evidence of it would eventually come out.

I quickly explained about the house where the pack had been staying, leaving out the details about Michael slashing the mother's throat. I just couldn't form the words to make him look like an even bigger monster. I still held out hope that there was some valid reason for his presence with the pack.

We arrived at the park without incident and pulled into a parking area. "Has anyone been here?" Nina asked, out one of the tinted windows. It was late and there wasn't anyone in sight.

"I know the park, and so does Bruce," I replied as we all got out of the vehicle and got flashlights from the trunk. We found an area in the park that was perfect for an ambush and split up. Jason and Frasier climbing into a couple of trees to act as lookouts, while Cormac and Nina stayed together under a dark clump of trees. Bruce and I stayed together as well and went across the open area to take position under another group of trees. I don't know where Brother Stephen went. He disappeared almost as soon as we exited the limousine and I had to admit that I was a little glad. I haven't spent much time with Lupines and he made me a bit nervous. What the hell was Cormac thinking when he brought him along anyway?

"They're here," Bruce whispered in my ear about twenty minutes later and indicated an odd shadow that was heading our way. "You might want to signal them." I flashed the light quickly in Cormac and Nina's direction then, just as we had set up and pulled my gun. Bruce stepped out from behind the tall oak where we had been waiting and the shadow dispersed enough to reveal Roger Campbell.

"Good evening, my childe," Roger said in French to Bruce who had continued forward and now stood a few feet from the other Lasombra. "It's good to see you got my message."

"Yes, I got it. You need to brush up on your French, though. Your pronunciation is a little off." As far as I could tell the other man's French was perfect but Bruce's knowledge of the language was far older than mine since he was a few hundred years older. I was sure to some extent he was being serious.

"You have been too long from you clan," Roger continued, unabashed. "I invite you to rejoin us. Your skills are needed."

"I have been too long from my clan?" Bruce asked, maintaining the rouse that he was Tremere.

"We know you are one of us." Roger was beginning to sound annoyed.

"When I was created there were no clans," Bruce scoffed. "My clan is Tremere."

"I know you are one of us," Roger said with that sly smile I was beginning to hate. "We have been watching you closely since you came up from the ground. Keeping an eye on you and waiting for the perfect opportunity for you to rejoin us."

"I can't rejoin anything I never belonged to," Bruce said evenly and simply. "It wasn't by choice that I was created. I won't be involved with those who forced this upon me."

"I was not your sire," Roger insisted. "That is not how we all do things."

"Correct my if I'm wrong," Bruce began, sounding like he was getting upset now, "but I understand that you think of people as food and nothing else."

"And what are they if they're not?"

"I have lived for 1100 years and I have resisted the temptation of human blood." That was the one thing Bruce couldn't bring himself to do. Feed from humans. I've always thought something horrible happened before his torpor that left him with that affliction.

"So you think," Roger scoffed. "Where do you suppose your blood comes from every evening? Do you think they keep cows in the back just for you?"

Bruce was silent for a moment before he replied, "Even if it is human blood it was given freely, by donation. It wasn't forcibly taken."

I couldn't take any more belittling from this jerk. Stepping out from behind the tree I asked in an even voice as I started to raise my gun, "What have you done?" I knew there would only be a short time before his shadows confined my hand again and I prayed that Bruce or one of the others could stop him in some way.

Roger laughed as he raised his arms. "Ah, that's why I wanted you to bring your friends, Bruce. Most of them are Tremere and we can use them as well." He looked over to where Cormac and Nina were and gestured them forward but they didn't come out.

I now had Roger in my sights and I felt the familiar pull of shadows attempting to encircle my hand once again but I jerked away from them and seemed to succeed. From the corner of my eye, I saw Cormac raise his gun to shoot as well. I thought I saw Nina throw something that appeared to be a card that was grabbed by a shadowy tentacle that rose from the ground.

I pulled the trigger of my Glock just as a shadow enshrouded Roger and it was then that things went into overdrive. Bruce moved forward to attack the other Lasombra and the shadow moved away very fast. We all chased him but were blinded by a flash of white light. I felt what seemed to be a person, maybe Bruce because he was right behind me, being thrown into my back. Everything went dark.

I saw visions of myself and Michael walking hand-in-hand in a sunny meadow. He smiled down at me as I reached up to remove his sunglasses and we kissed tenderly. Then I was lying on a bed in a hospital room. Michael was there with me and I was in incredible pain but I couldn't remember ever feeling so happy.

Then I realized that I was standing on the other side of a white picket fence that surrounded a duplex. Antonio was there, talking to Michael who was standing just inside the door. I won't let The Spaniard hurt my family I thought to myself. I will kill him first. Then I fell to the ground and lost consciousness.

Part III

Chapter 30: Role Reversal

*"I had a dream last night
And it fit me like a glove."
Butthole Surfers
"Whatever (I Had A Dream)"*

I awoke with a heavy weight on my back. My head was fuzzy, trying to understand the visions that had just run through it. What did it all mean? I knew they weren't my memories because Michael was a vampire went we met. We never had the opportunity to walk through a sunny meadow.

"Bruce?" I asked thickly, remembering what had happened before I ended up here.

"Are you okay?" Bruce whispered from above me. It was his weight I felt and for some reason, that thought gave my some comfort.

"Yes. Are you okay?" I asked in an equally low voice.

"A little dizzy, but other than that, okay."

"Where are we?" I opened my eyes and saw the white fence in front of me.

"On the ground," he said dryly.

"Very funny," I mumbled as I elbowed him and he got up with a grunt. I rolled over and took the hand he offered and got to my feet. I could hear angry voices and turned to see who they were and where they came from.

The duplex was the same one that I'd seen in my vision and Antonio and Michael were both there as well. I absently brushed my shirt and pants free of any dirt and slowly moved to enter the yard, vaguely aware that Bruce was still with me. We had walked into an argument.

"...not here. Even if she were you must know you wouldn't be welcome." I knew without a doubt that was Michael's voice. What on earth was going on around here?

"I demand to see her. She has much to answer for, Moorecock. Much to answer for." I'd only seen Antonio this agitated a few times before and then never with a friend.

"She had a warrant for you childe, Spaniard," Michael continued from the doorway. "The kill was legal. You have no right to come here." Come here? What was going on? What about Antonio's childe? Was it Christina that he was so upset about?

"I have every right. That bastard killed her husband. She was within our laws to take his life in return." I recognized the passion in his voice and knew what ever it was he was talking about meant a great deal to him. "The warrant against her would never have been issued if your wife hadn't pushed it. I demand satisfaction," he finished with a sneer.

Michael's voice got very deep as he said, "Demand your satisfaction from the courts, Spaniard. You'll get nothing here." I knew he meant business and hoped we hadn't walked into a fight we couldn't stop.

I saw that Antonio was a vampire but for some reason Michael looked human to me and I started to get scared. That had to mean that the alternate Rafe had been right when he said Michael was a werewolf. What did that mean in his relationship with the Brenda from this world? And what about Antonio? He couldn't in anyway be like my sire. This couldn't be the same kind of man who took me under his wing and embraced me because he knew how much I loved Michael. I started to get the feeling that I wasn't anywhere near Kansas anymore.

I glanced to Bruce and saw that he was angry and going for his gun. "This is not the time," I said putting my hand on his arm. "We do not know what's going on here. It's Antonio and Michael, but we don't know what they are. Hold back, alright?" He nodded reluctantly and released his hold on the gun, removing his hand from his jacket.

"That's Antonio?" Bruce asked in a normal voice that didn't draw the attention of either of the men on the porch. We were at the bottom of the stairs now and I stopped there taking in the two of them.

"I see you, Antonio Miguel Santiago Moreno," I finally said from where I stood.

He straightened tensely and turned around on the porch, startled to hear me behind him and I think a little shocked to hear me say his name. He didn't look like the Antonio I knew. His hair was extremely short by his standards, not even touching the collar of his shirt and his attire was very modern. Suddenly I felt the powerful rush come over me. It seemed to emanate from Antonio but I had no knowledge of a discipline with that effect as this one he was using. It was as if he was trying to influence me in some way but it wasn't working.

"Somebody's pissy," Bruce said, bringing attention to himself.

"Bruce?" Antonio asked astonished as if he recognized him. "I thought you were dead." He now moved to the edge of the porch for a better look at my companion.

In response, Bruce put his first two fingers to the inside of his wrist as if he was feeling for a pulse and simply said, "I am."

"I heard the master of Salem cut your head off." He seemed truly impressed to see Bruce standing before him. "What are you doing here? Rachel will be so glad to see you." He then remembered who Bruce was with and asked, "What are you doing with her?" He was glaring at me again.

"When was this?" Bruce asked, ignoring Antonio's question. He was adjusting his neck and the collar of his shirt in discomfort as if thinking about losing his head. You didn't mention beheading in front of a Kindred and not expect some sort of awkwardness. Leave it to Bruce to find humor in the situation.

I looked to the door and saw Michael there, looking as handsome as he did the day he left Salem two years ago. He was standing just inside the screen door so it was hard to get a good look at him. My heart lurched anyway.

"Two years ago," Antonio was saying, not understanding Bruce's apparent loss of memory. "Just after you came up from the ground. Why would you hide for two years? Rachel has been missing you horribly. I had to make her move here so that bitch wouldn't kill her. And what are you doing with her?" he asked again menacingly and pointing a finger at me this time.

"He is my adopted child," I said calmly, waiting for Antonio to realize exactly what I was.

"Brenda?" Michael called from inside the house. "Why don't you come in here, away from the nice vampires?" Confusion was evident in his voice and my heart went out to him, he didn't know what was going on.

I heard Bruce start to laugh and elbowed him into silence.

"Brenda, come on." Michael was gesturing for me to come inside now.

"Michael, everything is fine," I said as evenly.

"Everything is not fine," he insisted. "Your gun's not out and you're not in here."

"Michael, you need to trust me."

"Well Bruce, you can help me out here," Antonio said with a sneer, effectively getting my attention again. "I have vengeance to seek." He was looking at me in a way that made me feel not liked.

"Antonio, look again," was all I said.

"How do you know that name?" he raged. "I have told only one person that name in 300 years. Did you torture her before you killed her?"

"I would not hurt her," Bruce said in a friendly manner. "Use your Auspex, Antonio." I heard a baby crying from inside the house as Antonio gave me a hard look. He was studying me.

Michael glanced over his shoulder then said to me, "I'll go get her. Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'll be fine," I replied reassuringly. I watched him disappear into the house, realizing that part of the visions made sense now. I must have been seeing parts of her life, the Brenda from this world. The pain in the hospital must have been childbirth. They have at least one child, I thought to myself in despair. They are happy, in love and have a family. And he thinks I'm her. What am I going to do? I felt more than a little panicked.

Where was Rafe? I realized I hadn't really thought of him ever since our little flip into the Twilight Zone. Was he next door? I knew that's where the other Rafe lived and I wanted to go to the door and knock but my current situation was way too tense. I focused on Antonio again.

"*Mio Dios,*" he was saying. "You're a vampire."

"In my world I am, and it is you I have to thank for it." My tone was even but he still looked taken aback.

"Christina is missing," Bruce continued. "Do you know where she is?"

Antonio's face contorted in pain as he returned his attention to Bruce. "She's not missing," he spat. "She's dead and this bitch killed her." There went the finger in my direction again.

"Antonio," I began, "something is going on here. We are not from this world." How was I supposed to explain this to him? He was already extremely upset and probably thought I was playing games with him.

We all must have heard the door open at the same time because our three heads turned in unison. Christina and Rafe stood just outside the doorway of the other apartment.

"Christina!" Antonio exclaimed as he went to her side and wrapped his arms around her in a fierce hug.

"Antonio wait," I said. "That's not your Christina."

"Not today I'm not," she said easily as she pushed away from him. "I know I haven't seen you in a while but –" she trailed off, seeming to remember that he wasn't the sire she knew and had been avoiding for a couple years.

Rafe had worked his way around the group of people to reach my side. I was so relieved to see him as he pulled me into his arms and hugged me tightly. "Are you all right?" I asked.

"I'm fine," he said, still holding me close. "Just very confused about what's going on." I pulled back to look at him, just to make sure he was real. "There are things going on here I don't think you realize."

"What? That this Brenda's a hunter?"

"Yeah," he said amazed. "How'd you know?"

"You kind of told me," I said with a smile.

"Oh, let me guess – he's there?" After I nodded he asked, "Is he a creep?"

"No, he's a nice guy, but he's not you." I hugged him to me again and he kissed my temple lightly.

"Look," I heard Christina say from behind me and I turned. "I know you think I'm you're childe but I'm not. And I know you look like my Antonio but you're the Spaniard and we gotta figure this out." It was a good thing she didn't need to breathe. She was rattling along like a village idiot. "This isn't the Brenda you know, it's the Brenda I know and she's

your child and you don't know Bruce in our world. There's a Michael here that's married to you," she finished in a flourish as she turned her attention to me. I could tell she was nervous and upset, that's why she was ranting.

"I know," Rafe and I said at the same time then looked at each other. Remembering how touchy of a subject Michael was, I put my hand to his face and he covered it with his own.

"He needs to know what's going on so he doesn't come into this situation and flip out," I said.

"I know," he replied in a low voice. "There's a matter about giving something to Antonio or he's going to kill you." He pulled an envelope from his pocket and handed it to me.

"Well then, let's do that." I looked at the envelope and recognized Christina's handwriting on it. It was addressed to the Spaniard. I went to where he was still talking to my Christina and held out the envelope. "The Christina you knew apparently left this for you."

He snatched it from my hand, "Where did you get this?"

"It was by the door. I have no idea how it got there," Rafe told him. "There's a journal in there as well that says if you don't get this you'll kill Brenda and I don't want you to kill her so there it is."

"Chris, Michael is over there," I said taking her hand and she gently squeezed it in return. "I have to go talk to him. He's gotta know what's going on here." My voice was shaky and I dreaded the upcoming confrontation but I knew I had to do it. Christina nodded quietly and I could tell she was depressed and upset. I wished I had the time to talk to her now but dealing with Michael was more important.

I went to the door of the home Brenda and Michael shared and looked inside. It was a living room filled with warm comfortable furniture that was decorated in a style I myself would have chosen. The TV was on but no one was in the room. In one corner there was a playpen with older children's toys neatly piled next to it. I opened the screen and was surprised to find that I couldn't enter when I tried. It was like an invisible shield of some kind was keeping me from entering.

"Michael?" I called into the house, my hand resting on the barrier.

"Yeah, Bren. Are you okay?" His voice was coming from the second floor.

"Kind of." How could I tell him I couldn't enter? This was stupid. "Um, can you come here?"

"Why don't you come here?" he replied.

"I can't."

"Brenda, you know you can come in the house. Come on." And with those words my hand fell into the room as if by magic. I remembered hearing of vampires needing to be invited into a home but that was only in stories. I had never known of an actual Kindred impeded in such a way. With a final glance over my shoulder at Rafe I walked inside.

"Where are you?" I asked stepping into the room and letting the screen close behind me.

"I'm upstairs in Anna's room." Was that one of their children? I suddenly found myself wondering what they looked like. Did they have a boy that looked like Michael, with blond hair and clear blue eyes? Or did they have a girl with dark hair like mine? My emotions were such a whirl as I headed for the stairs that led to the second floor. What would he do when he found out that I wasn't his wife or worse yet, that I was one of the beings she hunted?

I worried that I would have to defend myself against him and I dreaded that I might have to hurt him. I wondered if my abilities were the same now that I found myself in a different place so I quickly lowered my fangs as I reached the bottom of the stairs just to

make sure I still could and retracted them again. It would be stupid to meet Michael with that kind of calling card. I would be dead for sure.

There were picture frames on the wall that led up the stairs and I studied them as I slowly climbed up. They were the typical pictures of a growing family. Wedding day photos, professional poses of a couple and two children, and single pictures of two adorable little girls in various stages of development. The oldest was Anna and the baby was Brenna I learned from this Brenda's neat script that was so familiar to me. She had made collages of the girls their names in a colorful script.

The weird thing about the whole thing was that the mother was me, but not me. They all looked so happy I thought I was going to cry. It wasn't that I wanted to be the wife and mother in those pictures. It's just that the point was driven home once again that I could never *be* a wife and mother.

"Brenda?" Michael called, bringing me out of my thoughts. "Are you coming up? Come on, Anna wants to see you." I was stunned. I couldn't do this.

"Mommy." I heard a small child call out.

"Michael?" I was barely maintaining my composure.

"Yeah. Did you get rid of the Spaniard?"

"Um. We need to talk." There was no way in hell I was going up there.

"Did you kill the vamp on the stairs?" His tone said he was getting fed up with my hesitation.

"Could you come here please?" I heard movement and a few seconds later he appeared at the top of the stairs with a little girl that looked no more than three years old in his arms.

"Mommy," she cried and held out her little arms in my direction. I felt as if someone was ripping my heart out.

Michael must have seen my discomfort because he asked, "Brenda, what's wrong?" When I didn't respond he put Anna down and lowered himself down beside her. "Honey, why don't you go lay down. Mommy will be up later." She nodded with a finger in her mouth, something my father told me I always did, and walked out of sight. Not however, before blowing me a kiss and waving her little hand in my direction.

Michael rose and started down the stairs and I turned and did the same. When we were in the living room I quickly crossed to the other side to put as much space as possible between us.

"What's wrong, Brenda?" Michael asked following me. "Come on and give me a kiss. What did the Spaniard do to shake you that bad?"

"N-nothing," I stammered taking another step away from him.

Something caught his attention from the porch and he glanced out the front door. "He's still out there," he stated.

"Michael, please sit down. I know you're confused." He reached for my hand but I pulled away and he looked at me questioningly. "Michael, I have to talk to you," I indicated the couch. "Please sit down, there are some things I need to explain."

"Okay. I don't understand, but-" I followed him to the couch and he sat on the edge of it. There was a coffee table in front of the couch and I took a seat in front of Michael.

He moved to take my hand again and I dodged him. "Wait before you do that," I stammered and he laid his hands on my thighs instead. "There is something going on."

"Obviously," he chuckled slightly, then his expression turned serious. "Were you outside a long time? You're cold." He was looking down to where his hands lay and he

started moving them up and down my thighs. Stop this, I warned myself. This is NOT a good idea.

"I-I'm going to be cold," I croaked out.

"I could warm you up," he replied slyly looking into my eyes with a come hither glance. My gaze went to the door and I was relieved that Rafe wasn't standing there. He probably would have rushed in with guns blazing.

"H-how can I say this," I said half out loud and half to myself. "Michael, I am not the Brenda you think I am."

"What," he laughed, "did you go and do something weird?"

"No. This is going to seem hard to believe –"

"This whole thing is weird, honey. You're not leaving me are you?" His tone turned serious all of a sudden.

"No. Oh, my God. I am not from this world. Something has happened and I have switched places with your wife."

"I know it's almost Halloween, Bren but come on. Is this some kind of trick?" His grip tightened slightly on my legs but he caught himself and relaxed his fingers again.

"This is no joke. I am *dead* serious." Our eyes were locked and I saw that something was going on in the depths of his clear blue ones. They were changing, becoming more animalistic in appearance. I also began to feel some kind of power wash over me again. Something like I felt earlier coming from Antonio but this time it came from Michael. Then I remembered what the other Rafe had told me.

Chapter 31: Revealing the Truth

*"Is this a blessing? Or is it a curse?
Does it get any better? Can it get any worse?"
Meatloaf
"It Just Won't Quit"*

"Michael, are you Lupine?" I asked in partial disbelief.

He quickly removed his hands from my thighs then and gripped the couch cushion instead. He looked as if someone had slapped him across the face. "Brenda, you know I am. Don't play games with me," he almost growled.

"Michael believe me I wouldn't do that to you." I was really starting to get nervous. I didn't know much about werewolves to begin with and now I found myself in a place where I had to wonder about my abilities. It was too much to have to question what little knowledge of other things I had.

"What did you do with my wife?" he asked. He was beginning to believe what I was trying to tell him.

"She's probably in my world with my friends." At least I hoped Micky and Sarah had arrived at the park to find our counterparts. I found myself wondering what happened to the others who were in the park with us.

"Your vamp friends?" Michael asked gruffly.

"Nothing will happen to her," I assured him.

"How do we get her back?" He still looked dangerous but he was managing to keep a tight reign on his emotions.

"That's what we need to figure out."

"How did you get here?"

"In my world, we are fighting this group of not so nice vampires."

"That would be all of them," he retorted pointedly.

"No. Look, do you have the ability to tell if I'm lying to you or not?" I wasn't going to get anywhere if he couldn't trust me enough to believe what I was telling him.

"Try and find out. You've never been able to lie to me." He actually sounded smug, the jerk.

"Then you'll believe me when I tell you. There is a group called the Sabbat. Are you familiar with them?"

"It's a witches c-" he started.

"No," I quickly dismissed his assumption. "In our society they are a group, maybe like the vampires here. I don't know for sure, I've only met Antonio."

"Who?"

"Antonio. You know, the man who wishes to kill you wife."

"The Spaniard? His name is Antonio?" I didn't understand the big secrecy over Antonio's name. It's not like it was Eugene or anything.

"Yes," I replied.

"How did you get here and why isn't Christina dead?" I heard the cushion under his clenched fingers begin to tear. I had to admit his control was really admirable.

"I'll tell you everything if you'll just give me some time. I believe they have done some kind of black ritual that has switched us. For what reason, I don't know. Maybe they thought we were a threat to their plan to take over the city and they'll be able to achieve their end easier without us there." Then I thought about the bugs and cameras that were found in my

house and how angry the Michael from my world must have been to see me with another man. He could be pretty possessive when he wanted to. "On the other hand, maybe they're just having some fun and experimenting for the future."

"How do we fix it?" he asked.

"I don't know." And it really pissed me off. I felt so helpless and I didn't like the feeling.

"Well, maybe we better find someone who does." He sounded angry because I didn't have all the answers and I couldn't blame him.

"That's my hope."

"Who's that?" he asked finally noticing my adopted child who sat next to Antonio on the porch.

"That's my friend, Bruce Blackwell."

"And I bet he's a vamp too." After I nodded he continued under his breath, "I'm surrounded by vamps. Let me guess, you could come in because I told you to."

"I guess," I replied hesitantly. I still didn't understand what was up with me not being able to come in. "On my life, Michael, nothing will happen."

"I will not allow anything to happen to my children."

"Neither will I. They are an extension and you and her."

"Well let's go outside and discuss this if you can keep the Spaniard under control."

"I will do whatever I have to." We both stood at the same time, ending up nose to nose and close enough to touch our lips together. For an instant I think the both of us almost forgot who the other was and just kissed because it was so easy. Even though I hadn't been with my Michael for over two years I still felt the familiarity of being with him just by the close contact with the man in front of me.

The moment lasted that long however. Just a moment. I'm not sure but I thought the both of us moved closer and almost kissed then remembered ourselves and pulled awkwardly away. We went out to the porch where Bruce and Antonio were still seated on the steps, Antonio was still reading the contents of the envelope Rafe had brought out of the adjoining house. Rafe and Christina stood leaning against the house staying out of the way.

"Do you know any mages or anyone with magical abilities?" I asked Michael as the screen door once again shut.

"No one Brenda hasn't killed," he replied. "She doesn't make friends in the supernatural community. E-except Lupines," he added guiltily.

"Great," I muttered.

Antonio finished reading then and carefully folded the papers and replaced them in the envelope. When Bruce asked him if he was all right Antonio looked to the sky and nodded his head quietly, blood tears were apparent in his eyes but he wasn't letting them fall. The two men continued to talk in low voices as Michael and I joined Christina and Rafe.

I noticed a hole about the size of a fist in the side of the house, just below Christina's shoulder, and I thought that something more had happened to upset her. She tended to hit things when she got angry. When I looked at her pointedly she ignored me and I didn't press her about it. There would be time later.

Rafe looked relieved that Michael and I hadn't come out of the house arm in arm and I had to admit there was a small part of me that wanted just that. He moved to stand beside me but I discreetly held out a hand for him to wait. I didn't want Michael to see that the two of us were involved.

I wasn't discreet enough however because Michael looked from Rafe to me and asked, "Let me guess, Rafe went too?" I nodded slowly and he replied, "So this Rafe is from your world?"

"Yes."

"And you guys are lovers aren't you?" he asked with disgust and it pissed me off.

"Only because you left me," I defended myself in a low voice. This guy was not going to put me on the spot for any of my decisions.

"Wasn't me," he said simply. "I never would have left my Brenda."

"But he did."

I didn't stop Rafe this time when he moved to come to my side. Michael eyed him up and down in an almost jealous way.

"In this world she ended up with yours. Her sire sent it to her," I heard Antonio say from behind me and I turned to see that Buffy Summers and Rachel Black were striding up the front walk.

"Her what?" Bruce asked. Rachel's attention was brought to him and shock filled her features. Buffy looked from the sword Bruce was holding to the one sticking out from behind her right shoulder.

"Are you Bruce?" she asked in disbelief.

"Last time I checked," he replied. Rachel finally came to her senses and began to slowly approach the porch, clutching her chest.

Buffy looked to me and asked, "Brenda, what's going on?"

"This is Lord Bruce Blackwell," was all I said. I didn't know whether these newcomers would be friend or foe and I wasn't about to give away anything more.

"I thought you were dead," Rachel said when she reached the bottom of the stairs. "I saw her kill you." She had eyes only for Bruce and I wondered what kind of relationship the two of them had had in this place.

"She did." Bruce stood and pulled her up the stairs and into his arms.

"Bruce, is she alright?" I asked.

"Yeah, she's fine. Not exactly what I'm used to." He was looking down at her awkwardly, like she was a toad or something.

"What are you talking about?"

"Let me guess," Michael said incredulously from next to me, "in your world she's not a vampire?"

"No," I replied as I really looked at her for the first time and realized he was right. "She is here though."

Rachel pulled back in Bruce's embrace and stared at him. "What are you talking about? You're the one who made me."

Bruce was visibly shaken and it took him a moment to reply. "No, I-I don't think so."

"What about the Slayer?" I asked indicating Buffy with my head. I had also noticed that she too was of the Kindred variety.

"Me? I'm not the Slayer, you are. I gave up that job. Well, I had no choice. What was I suppose to do, slay myself?"

"That would have been interesting," Bruce chuckled.

Buffy turned her attention to Antonio, "Is this your revenge?"

"Wasn't me," he replied with his hands in the air.

"Yeah, it was." Bruce was still chuckling as he tucked Rachel under one arm.

"Bruce," I warned. "I think that's irrelevant right now. Chris are you okay?"

"Yeah."

"What happened to your hand?"

"The wall hit it," she mused with a slight smile.

"Don't you hate it when that happens?" Bruce interjected with irony.

"Yeah. Kind of stings."

I smiled at her and turned to Antonio. "We need your help, Antonio."

"Antonio?" Buffy asked, her nose wrinkled. "Is that your name?"

The look he gave me said, can't you keep your mouth shut. Bruce leaned toward me and said lowly, "I think we should call him the Spaniard."

"I don't understand what's going on," Antonio said shaking his head. "Where were you before you came to this world?"

"A-aren't we in Salem?" I asked. The thought hadn't even crossed my mind before. It was crazy enough dealing with the fact that we were no longer in our time but to think that we weren't in Salem either was particularly disturbing.

"Salem, Washington?" Antonio asked in disbelief.

"No, Salem, Massachusetts," I replied.

He shook his head, a piteous look on his face. "Try Nashville, Tennessee," was all he said. Nashville? How could this be? The more information I got about this place the more confused I became.

"We need to find a Tremere," I said under my breath as I thought about what our next move should be.

"A what?" Buffy asked. I couldn't remember just how much Kindred knowledge she had but since she was now a vampire herself I expected that she would.

"A Tremere," I repeated. "You." I pointed to Antonio.

He just stared blankly at me however. "I don't know what that is," was all he said.

"Spooky boo," Bruce interjected.

"You know Thaumaturgy? Blood Magic?"

"That I can do," he said with a slight grin.

"We need to find somebody with the ability to switch us back," I said. "Do you know anyone?"

"I believe it was a Lasombra that had something to do with it," Bruce offered.

"Yes, I think it was some dark ritual they performed."

"You guys are obviously not from around here," Antonio said. "You said you were from Salem. Who do you know there?"

"Elvira Van Dorn is the Prince and her childe, Micky George."

Antonio shook his head sadly. "He's her ghoul, here. Well he used to be before she lost him in a card game."

"Is Elvira still alive in the world?" I asked Antonio.

"Yeah. But I don't think you want to call her. What about Faith?"

I nodded. "She's a Tremere from Nashville."

"Now she's in Salem but she probably won't talk to me. She's a little upset with me."

"Why? What did you do?" Bruce asked.

"There can be only one Master vampire in town at a time," he explained. It was decided that Rachel would try to contact Faith. After finding out that Bruce's cell phone didn't work here Rafe went into his counterparts apartment to get a cordless.

Bruce seemed to notice Michael who was standing on the fringe of the group and cautiously approached him. "This has got to be hard on you," he said friendly.

"What, being surrounded by vamps? Or how about finding out that my wife isn't my wife? Or that in another world she's my friend's lover? And that she's a vamp?"

"If it's any comfort to you at all, in the other world you're a vampire, too." I didn't mean to hurt him in any way but he was acting like he was the only one displaced in this whole situation.

"Oh, really? Was that before or after the werewolf bit me on campus?"

"You weren't born Lupine?" I asked.

"No. How do you get to be Lupine in your world?"

"You're born," Bruce and I replied together.

"Not here. You have to be bit."

"I'm sorry," I muttered.

"Lotta changes," Bruce said as he turned and went to speak to Buffy. I smile a little smile. Bruce had said that when he first came up from Rachel's yard. Obviously there were many things, everything to be exact that were different from the time in which he had lived. He took things in stride and began to use that phrase when he tried to understand a new situation. I hadn't heard him say that in a while.

"I saw the photographs on the stairway."

"The kids?"

"Yes. They're beautiful."

"They look a lot like you."

"You're a lucky individual. I hope you understand and realize what you have with her."

"I thank God every day."

"I'm glad one of you does." Distracted

"I'm not in the other world?"

"Not lately."

"Which would explain why you're sleeping with Rafael. He's not a vamp?"

"No, he's not." Rafe came out with the phone then and handed it Rachel then started across the porch to me. "I understand you have reservations about me and that's fine but-" I knew I had no right to ask what I was about to but I couldn't stop myself. "Is there anyway I could just look at the girls?"

"You know I can kill you," he said in a low voice.

"I'll give you the gun."

"I don't need a gun. If you swear you won't harm them."

"I swear it with my life."

"Alright."

"I'll be right back," I said to Rafe and kissed his cheek. He looked apprehensive again but didn't say anything as Michael and I crossed the porch. Once inside the house, I carefully took out each of my guns and placed them on the coffee table.

Michael led the way upstairs. The bedrooms were all on the left and he went into the first of them. The nursery was done in pink with an adorable bunny border along the top of the walls. The room was spacious but filled with a crib, toddler bed and two tall dressers. More toys spilled from an ancient but sturdy toy box that I recognized as my own from childhood. Anna was sitting up in her bed with a stuffed Ernie on her lap.

"Mommy! Daddy!" she cried when she saw us. Michael crossed the room and put his first finger to his lips in a gesture designed to keep the little girl quiet. He sat on the bed and laid his large hand on her head. "How ya doing, honey?" he asked.

"I'm waiting for my kiss so I can do to sleep," she informed him matter of factly. I could tell that this child had a memory as long as an elephant. She got to her knees and threw her chubby arms around Michael's neck I a fierce hug of joy. He hugged her in return and I knew his was upset and trying to hide it from the little girl.

I glanced in the crib from where I had stopped in the doorway and saw that the baby, Brenna, who was about a year old, was fast asleep. She looked purely angelic and I knew she would be as beautiful as Anna was.

Michael and Anna exchanged more hugs and kisses before she broke away and turned to me with her arms outstretched again. I looked to Michael for help. I knew there was no way in hell he was going to let me touch them and he would have to defuse the situation.

"Mommy isn't feeling good tonight, honey," he explained as he laid her down on the bed and pulled the covers over her. "She doesn't want to make you sick, too, so you're going to have to blow her kisses."

"Okay," she laughed in that child like innocence as she sat up and blew me a kiss. My heart ached again as I watched her. "Aren't you going to catch it, Mommy," she asked sadly.

"Oh, right," I replied as I caught the imaginary kiss and blew one to her in return.

"I hope you feel better, Mommy," Anna said with a yawn then added, "Make Daddy kiss it and make it all better."

"Thank you, sweetie," I croaked. I knew I was near to tears and didn't want to scare the little girl so I quickly ducked out into the hallway while Michael finished the tucking in ritual.

"Thank you," I said lowly after he joined me in the hall.

"Did you love me in that world?" he asked quietly.

"I still do."

"Then what happened?"

"You left me. I met you when I lived in Las Vegas. You are a very smart and charming man. I helped you I you business ventures and we developed a relationship. About six months later I found out that you were a vampire. You made me your ghoul and we were happy."

"Ghoul? I put my mark on you?"

"You fed me blood periodically and I stopped aging. I was still human so I could be out during the day."

"So I made you my human servant."

"Kind of, yes. I helped you. We had a relationship. We loved each other."

"So what happened?" he asked.

"I wanted to become like you. To be your equal and you didn't want to give it to me. I understood that, but –"

"Don't blame me."

"Sorry. So when someone else offered, I thought it would be perfect. I thought we could have whatever kind of normal life we could have in terms of Kindred."

"What?"

"Vampires. So I went and got embraced and when I came back you had changed. I don't think you liked not having a hold over me anymore. You told me I needed time to adjust to my new life." I was trembling slightly. I had never really talked about everything that happened with him to anyone. Micky had the basic facts but I didn't think he really wanted the whole story, especially now that I had found out about Michael and Sarah. "You left me," I finished in a small voice.

Michael was surprisingly silent. I was sure he would have taken the opportunity to give a few jibes about the stupidity of allowing yourself to get embraced. We reached the top of the stairs and started down.

"I'm sorry," I said, trying to sound normal. "I didn't mean to unload on you."

"Sounds like I'm a real asshole. I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault."

"You're right. I would have never acted like that. Well, I guess I did. Let's go downstairs and see if we can't get back what's suppose to be."

Chapter 32: Saying Good-bye to What Can Never Be

*"Have you come here for forgiveness?
Have you come to raise the dead?"*

U2

"One"

"Yeah, so I can get out of your hair," I replied to Michael. We were back in the living room and I was collecting my weapons. Just as I turned to glance out the screen door I saw Christina reach back with her fist and for no apparent reason at all hit the wall of the house. If memory served my right, there had been a hole in the wall already and it just happened to be right where her hand would have landed. Is she trying to disfigure herself or what, I thought as I went to the door and called out, "Chris? What are you doing?"

"I had an itch," she mumbled like a petulant child as her flexed her fingers.

"That wall didn't do anything to you," I retorted before turning back to Michael. He was only a few feet from me, the closest he'd willingly put himself since finding out what I was. "Can you uninvite me in?" I asked.

"Uninvite?" He thought for a moment and when he couldn't find an answer called out, "Hey, Spaniard. Anyway to uninvite?"

The Spaniard smiled wickedly. "No. Once we're in, we're in."

Rachel had finished her conversation by then and had returned the phone to Rafe. She informed us that the only person the Elvira of this world knew of who could perform that kind of ritual was Angelus. I'd never heard of anyone by that name so I asked, "So how do we go about getting there?"

"It's a couple hours by plane," Antonio intoned.

Rachel was afraid for Bruce to go to Salem and voiced her opinion. She didn't want to give Elvira the opportunity to kill him again and asked him to stay.

"Do not worry, love," Bruce soothed her and it was decided that she would accompany us to act as a guide of sorts. Rachel was happy to give us what information she had about the Salem of this world and I was a little surprised and concerned when she mentioned Akari's name. Rachel also informed us that Beth was still alive in this place and that she and Akari had Elvira wrapped around their little fingers.

And to tell the truth, that thought pissed me off. "I guess I'm gonna have to go to work," I growled lowly to Rafe. I wouldn't be able to live with myself if I left this world without restoring Elvira to the leader I knew she could be. She has done so much for me that I thought I could give back a little even if it wasn't the woman I knew. "Are there any tools of Brenda's trade around?" I asked Michael, getting ideas.

"Yeah. I have her executioners bag." He gestured with his thumb back into the house.

"Can I borrow a few things?" I figured a few finely sharpened stakes couldn't hurt the effort.

"Are you planning on bringing them back?" he asked indignantly as he eyed me warily. "Why don't you take the whole thing?"

I understood how he felt. We'd said our peace and I was sure that he didn't want to or plan to see me again after I walked off his front porch. "I don't want to take her entire supply."

"Don't worry. She has another in her car." He was grinning in that cocky way that had captured me heart to start off with. I mentally chastised myself for thinking of such things as I realized that I wasn't really experienced with stakes.

"Well, I guess I have phosphorus rounds. That should be enough."

"What?" Michael asked astonished. My comment had drawn the attention of the rest of the group who had all turned to face me.

"Does phosphorus do anything to you?" Bruce asked of Buffy.

"What?" she asked, echoing Michael.

"You know, Dragon's Breath," he pressed.

"There aren't any dragons in America," she said matter-of-factly her mouth twisting wryly. "They're in China."

Obviously they didn't have the phosphorous rounds in this world or they called them something else. Bruce went about finding out in another way. "What would happen if I held a lighter to you?"

"I would burn," she replied simply as she crossed her arms over her chest.

"Phosphorus is fire?"

Bruce pulled one of his guns from a shoulder holster and unloaded a round. He took it between his thumb and first fingers much like I had done with Rafe and held it up.

"Phosphorus," was all he said.

"Dragon's Breath," I confirmed. "Fire. It's extremely flammable."

"Really?" She was absolutely amazed. "Where do you get these?" Buffy took a step closer to Bruce and moved her hand as if to take the round from him. She changed her mind at the last moment, however, and crossed her arms once again as if she were slightly afraid to touch it.

"Elvira," he replied simply in answer to her question.

"Can we go please?" I asked. Time was wasting and we had to get to Salem if we ever had a chance of getting home.

"By all means," Antonio headed for the sidewalk then stopped and turned to Michael.

"Tell you wife she is safe from me for now. She has my childe to thank for that."

"That's fine but if you come back here again she'll kill you," Michael promised. He wasn't affected by Antonio's threat any more than the Michael I knew would have been.

"I won't be back unless she gives me cause to." The group started down the walk together.

I grabbed Rafe's hand as he turned toward the stairs. "Go ahead," I said to him in a low voice. "Make sure Christina is okay." I knew he wasn't happy about it but he did it reluctantly, offering Christina his arm as they arrived at the steps at the same time. Bruce had in turn offered his arm to Rachel and they all made a small parade of vampires down to the white picket fence. There was one more thing I wanted to do before we left.

I turned to Michael for one last time and said, "I want you to know I will do whatever it takes to set this right." It was my turn now to cross my arms over my chest.

"I hope so, I don't normally trust vampires." His eyes locked with mine and in those blue depths I saw the concern for the woman he loved and my heart went out to the both of them. God, I hope we can make things right, I thought to myself.

"I hope you can find it in you conscience to trust me." It was important to me that he could. What if we couldn't perform the ritual that would switch us back and we were stuck here?

"I just want my wife back." His tone was so matter of fact that I pushed my own concerns over our failure to the back of my mind.

"I will do whatever I need to," I promised.

"Fair enough."

I held out my hand and to my surprise he took it. "Thank you for showing me what could have been."

"I'm not sure I can say the same. I don't think I want to know what could have been with there." His statement crushed my insides but I didn't let him see it. I went half way down the walk and turned for one last look at Michael. He was as harsh as ever. Rafe was waiting when I headed back and I went to him and put my arm around his waist and rested my head on his shoulder as he hugged me to him.

It had been decided that the Spaniard was going to lend us his jet for the trip to Salem and had offered to see us to the airport. I thought it was because he wanted to spend as much time with Christina as possible even though he knew it wasn't his dead child. He and Buffy wouldn't be accompanying us to Salem but wished us well. I saw that Antonio and Christina were having a conversation of some kind off to the side just before we got into the cars to go to the airport and he handed her the envelope Rafe had given him at the house. Within minutes we were on our way.

Once the small convoy was in its way the knowledge of what was happening to us started play on my mind and I felt myself begin to mentally shut down. I knew I shouldn't do it but things were starting to weigh down too hard on my thoughts. What if we couldn't get back? What would happen to Anna and Brenna? I didn't think Michael would want me to be a part of their lives, given what I was. Hell, I didn't think I would want to be involved even if he did. What did I know about being a parent? Wasn't I the one who'd been shuffled off on my aunt whenever my dad had to go out on a run?

Don't get me wrong. My aunt was everything I could have wanted for a mother but that was just the thing. She wasn't my mom. To be blunt, I have no mothering skills other than my sometime overwhelming need to get people to do what I thought they should for their own good.

I stared out the window as we drove through the streets of Nashville, vaguely aware that Rafe was by my side in the back seat and that the others were having a conversation on the way to the airport. It was a different city than the one I'd visited a few years ago. After we left Michael and Brenda's neighborhood the city became darker and colder. There were few people on the streets and those I saw appeared to be thugs. Maybe if we had to stay here Christina, Bruce, Rafe and I could clean this place up. I knew that once my sister found out that Jason was in our Salem she wanted to get back quickly but I had to think about what to do if we didn't get there.

I heard someone say that Ford Radek had been killed not long after Akari's embrace in this world and that Elvira had been under Beth's thumb ever since. Elvira hardly ever went out by herself and she was apparently unaware of the fact that Akari and Beth were having an affair right under her nose.

Rachel was also saying something about the powers that vampires here had. Something about mind tricks being what I had felt earlier. Then The Spaniard's cell phone rang. After a short and rather abrupt conversation he replaced the phone in his pocket. "We have to make a detour," he said to the rest of us, bringing me out of my thoughts for a moment. I knew when it was okay for me to go internal and when I had to be alert. This was alert time, for sure.

"Why?" Bruce asked.

"The Master has called," he replied sarcastically. "He has requested our presence. We have to stop at The Iron on the way to the airport."

Bruce looked a little puzzled. "He knows we're here?"

"Yes. We vampires have a way of sensing when others of our kind are in the vicinity."

Bruce pondered for a moment then posed another question. "Can he sense Kindred in general or who we are?"

"I think it was my show of power at the Moorecock residence," The Spaniard admitted. He went on to give a physical description of the Master of the city and it reminded me of Wyatt Smith, Sarah's crazy brother that we had killed in our world when I first visited Nashville.

"We can get rid of him again," I said mechanically as I pulled my guns and checked them.

"What about Christina and Buffy?" Bruce interjected. He was indicating toward the front of the car and I figured he meant the car there. The pair must be in that vehicle ahead of us.

"I think it's best if we let them continue on to the airport," Antonio suggested as Rachel flashed them her bright lights to get them to pull over. They did and once both cars were parked on the side of the street I got out went to Christina. She was going through deep shit right now and I didn't want her to go along with us. In the frame of mind she was in right now she would be more a liability than an asset. I didn't want Rafe to go either so I was thinking fast as I came up beside my sister. "We gotta go see the Master," I said when we faced each other. "I think it would be best if you would go on to the airport."

Her face had been full of concern when she got out of the vehicle and now it drooped with disappointment. "You don't want me to go?" Her voice was full of hurt.

"No," I replied simply. I didn't want to hurt her feelings but I also knew I couldn't let her get involved. We all were in a precarious situation right now. We were receiving more information on how the vampires of the world did things but we didn't know everything and I couldn't let her get into a possible rough situation when she didn't have her wits about her. It was for the same reason I thought I'd have Rafe go with her. I could heal myself from pretty much anything, Rafe couldn't. I wasn't going to risk losing him, not now that I'd recently found him.

"Now you sound like Antonio." At least the hurt was gone from her voice. Replaced by condescension.

"Since when have I not sounded like Antonio." I smiled; glad I didn't have to argue with her like I thought I would.

"Good point. I guess I'll go to the airport." The Spaniard was letting Buffy know what had happened while Bruce and Rachel waited by her car. Rafe was making his toward us.

"Secure the plane." Snapping into Enforcer mode, I hugged and kissed her before I turned to Rafe. "I think you should go with Chris and make sure everything is okay on the plane."

"Okay," he replied slowly but I didn't really think about it at the time. We kissed quickly and I told him softly that I loved him before he got into the other car with my sister and Buffy. Bruce, Antonio, Rachel and myself returned to Rachel's car and headed for The Iron.

As we continued through the city I took a moment to study more of the terrain. I couldn't believe it when I saw a vampire actually feeding from a human in a dark corner and fought the desire to ask Rachel to pull over. There was nothing I could do now to help. The neighborhood was dirty and full of abandoned buildings that were covered with graffiti. Time to think about other things, I thought as I faced the front again.

"Are there any specific protocols?" I asked Antonio the first of many questions that were now taking over my thoughts. "What are the people around him like? What kind of security is there?"

"He will have a few people around him," he replied, turning in his seat up front to answer. "Rebecca will probably be there."

I recognized the name of the precious Prince of Nashville that had come up dead while we were there. Apparently she hadn't met the untimely end as her counterpart had. "Are they all expendable?" I asked.

"Rebecca is but I think Nez will be there and –"

"Nez?" I pressed. "As in Nez Smith?" It was amazing how some things ran parallel in this world but others didn't. Nez was someone I had met on my previous travels to Nashville as well. He just happened to be a friend of Micky's, too. Small world.

"Yes. I'd hate to see him go down," Antonio said sincerely. "I think if Wyatt weren't in charge Nez would be okay. Alida, too."

"Bruce, you remember Rebecca don't you? We get a double revision." Little waves of anticipation started in the base of my spine. This would be like double restitution for Sarah to kill her brother again.

"But this time I can't hold her up for Buffy," Bruce lamented.

"You'll have to do it yourself," I replied dryly.

"What are you talking about?" Antonio asked.

"We killed her," Bruce and I answered together.

"You were busy in your world," Antonio said just as dry as my earlier statement.

"From what Elvira tells me," Bruce began, "when Brenda comes to town Princes say, 'Hide me.'"

"Princes?" Antonio's brow creased. "There's many Princes in your world?"

"Princes are to us, what Masters are to you," Bruce explained. "So what's our cover story?"

"I don't care," I said coldly. "I'm going in to kill Wyatt and that's it." Antonio seemed surprised by my cold-hearted statement but blinked it away as he informed us that Zeke might be there as well. By now I was on total autopilot, not really knowing what I was doing, just gathering as much information as possible.

When we pulled up on front of The Iron I could tell it hadn't changed much on the outside. As we got out of the car to my surprise my cell phone rang. "Hello?" I said, thinking it might be Rafe. It wasn't.

"Brenda?" a female voice asked.

"Yes."

"This is Nina."

It took me moment to remember who she was. "Nina? Hi, where are you?" Had she flipped as well? If so, then where was she? What about Cormac and Stephen? More importantly, what about Jason? Did he flip, too?

"I'm in a nightclub called Jesters."

"You're in Salem?" I asked, astonished. This wasn't making any sense. The others had stopped and waited a few feet away, knowing something big was up.

"Yeah, where are you?"

I ignored her question and asked one of my own. "Are things a little different there?"

"Different is the understatement of the year," she said, then corrected herself, "No, my undead life."

"Are you guys okay?" I had other questions in my head but forced myself to ask one at a time.

"I think we've got things a little bit under control."

"Who's there?"

"Cormac and a woman named Sarah."

Sarah? my mind screamed. "Sarah who?"

"Let me ask her." I heard her pulled the phone from her ear and ask the question of the girl. "Her name is Sarah Hamilton," Nina said when she came back.

"Oh, my God. Is Micky there, too?"

"Yes. And a guy named Angelus."

"Angelus." I remembered Antonio saying something about a vampire by that name before. Maybe the fates were working with us after all.

Nina was continuing, "And apparently Cormac's wife, Eliza."

"Cormac's married?" I didn't know the man but it still shocked me about the married part but apparently things like that happened a lot between supernaturals here.

"That's what I said. They don't like silver and they're all tied up."

"You tied them up?"

"Well, yes. Cormac did."

"What are they like?"

"I didn't know them before but they all seem to be – pricks. They think I'm another Nina. Where are you guys?"

"We're in Nashville. I'm with Bruce and Christina and Rafe. Chris is on her way to the airport to ready a plane. We have to make a small stop then we're on our way to Salem. So we should be there in about two to three hours. Are you going to stay there? Where are you at in Jesters?"

"There's this conference room."

I mentally envisioned the layout of the place. "Okay. Are there two doors in the room you're in?"

"Yeah."

"One goes downstairs. The other does to living quarters upstairs. If you are threatened in any way you can fall back there. We'll be there as soon as possible." I really didn't want to make this stop now. If Nina and Cormac had Angelus there, he was who we needed to get the hell out of here.

"Okay. Call us when you get here." Nina gave me both her cell phone number and Cormac's.

Chapter 33: Renewing Nashville, Again

*"Like a bat out of hell
I'll be gone when the morning comes."
Meatloaf
"Bat Out of Hell"*

I replaced the phone in my pocket and quickly informed everyone of what was going on. We all agreed on the need to be expedient in our meeting with the Master and headed inside. The Iron's layout was the same as the one I knew but the whole place had taken on a darker look. There were people dancing in cages and the general element was tough and pointless. I glance to Bruce and found that he appeared to be disturbed by the changes but no one here seemed to be here against their will and we continued in.

"I know these people appear to be on our side," I said to Bruce after I fell back to walk next to him. The room was loud but I had no worry that others would overhear the two of us. "But I want you to know that you are the only person going into this that I trust."

"Butch and Sundance?" he asked with a grin.

"That's it." I was visually sweeping the bar as we walked and I saw many vampires feeding from humans throughout the crowd and couldn't help but unhook the guards that held my guns in their holsters and took notice of all the exit points. By the looks I got from those in the crowd I came to the conclusion that the other Brenda didn't frequent this establishment very often but the patrons of the place knew her. Antonio led the way to the anteroom on the basement level where I remembered waiting just before meeting the Prince of the city in my world. There was a woman there. "Spaniard," she greeted warmly. "It is good to see you. Wyatt is expecting you."

Antonio nodded as the girl turned to me. "What are you doing here?" she asked accusingly as if she couldn't believe her eyes.

"I was just hanging around," I said with a nonchalant shrug, not really wanting to deal with the occupation of my counterpart.

"I thought you were going to kill her," she said to Antonio.

"She is dead," Bruce observed dryly.

She shook her head as if the subject meant nothing. "You know I have to check you for weapons." She took a step toward Antonio and laid a hand on his shoulder. "No weapons," she announced proudly and regarded the rest of us. "Do I need to check these guys for weapons?"

"No."

"Okay. I'll take your word for it," she said and opened the door. She obviously saw Bruce's sword and didn't care. This was going to be way too easy.

The room was set up the same as the one I knew and the faces were the same with a few changes in stature. Rebecca was laying on the floor in front of the chair occupied by Wyatt and when I saw him all the emotions of what he did in my world all came rushing back with full force.

To Wyatt's right was a girl I thought I recognized as a friend of Buffy's. One of her helpers or something. And behind her was the lone male of Buffy's crowd, I thought his name was Xander and the girl was Willow. She was a vampire and he looked like a ghoul. The story behind her embrace must be a good one.

When my eyes fell on Zeke I saw that he still had a stupid cigar in his mouth. He was one who was stuck in his original era. His polyester leisure suit was the most God awful shade

of canary yellow and the shirt he wore under it had to have come straight from John Travolta's throw aways after the Saturday Night Fever movie. Horrible.

Nez Smith was standing off to the side. I immediately warmed to Micky's friend who had been so kind to me in my world. I knew people were different here but I felt I could trust him. Hopefully I wouldn't regret it later.

We formed a line in front of the dais and Antonio gave Wyatt a mock bow. "Wyatt, you requested our presence."

"Yes," he said as he looked us over. "I noticed a little earlier that you were being a bit *forceful* so I thought that it best that I found out why." I felt the familiar waves of power the Kindred from here possessed but it didn't really affect me. Wyatt's gaze fell on me and he seemed a bit surprised. "What is this, the Spaniard's revenge?"

"Could be," I replied coolly. I was in no mood to explain myself, especially to this asshole.

"You're awfully cocky for one newly dead," he observed, his eyebrow raising.

"Could be," I repeated. He was getting visibly upset with me and I didn't care.

"Rachel," Willow began. "Did you bring a puppy?"

"No, Will. That's my sire," the girl replied with pride as she looked over at Bruce.

Willow looked perplexed. "I thought he was killed by that Van Dorn woman." Rachel merely shrugged and continued to regard Bruce with love and affection.

"Zeke, it's good to see you again," I said to the man in the yellow leisure suit.

"Yes, it is," Bruce added.

The grin on his face melted away as he spoke to Bruce, "I've never seen you before." Then he turned to me. "I've only seen you on the other side of the stake."

"Could be," Bruce and I replied together.

"Looks like a stake would do you as much good as it would me," he observed in a cocky tone.

"Could be." Why break my streak of using the same two-word reply?

"How dare you bring these insolent creatures into my presence," Wyatt boomed as he got to his feet. I felt that odd power emanate from him as the room went black and I knew Bruce was sick of the banter and was getting down to business. "What the hell's going on?" Wyatt continued to rant and I heard gunshots ring out in the darkness. I instinctively pulled my guns but I couldn't see or do anything and felt useless. I hated it when he did that.

Power welled up from close to me and the two streams seemed to be fighting each other. Antonio and Wyatt must have been battling it out as more gunshots filled the room.

When the blackness faded what was left of Wyatt was burning on the floor and Rebecca had managed to slink off to one side and was cowering quite convincingly. Antonio had seated himself on the throne that Wyatt had previously occupied and Willow stood as well. She appeared to be totally outraged. I wasn't sure how they were going to respond so I pointed one Glock at Willow and the other at Zeke. No sense taking any chances.

"You should be on the other side of the stake," he said calmly as he chewed on his cigar.

"With these, I don't need a mere piece of wood."

"I don't think you need wood or a bullet for me. Good to see you where you belong, Spaniard." He turned to face Antonio and gave him a toothy grin.

"Yes. I'm glad this has been taken care of. Now we can restore the city to its original glory." Antonio gave Zeke a slight smile in return and regarded the rest of the room. Willow looked as if she were about to protest and found herself being pulled rather roughly down into her chair by one of Bruce's shadowy tendrils.

"Puppy," she said harshly as she glanced over her shoulder at Xander. "What are you doing?"

"I didn't do anything, mistress. I swear." He looked really petrified. Obviously their relationship was a strict one.

"That was fast," Nez put in. "I expected more of a fight. How'd you do that shadow thing?" he asked looking from Bruce to myself.

"Just lucky there was a power failure when there was," Bruce replied with a shrug. He was really great at blowing his powers off when he didn't want to explain them.

"I don't think so." Nez wasn't convinced.

Enough was enough. The job was done and I wanted to get home. I holstered the gun in my right hand and went to the dais and kissed Antonio's hand. "Good luck," I said then caught Rebecca out of the corner of my eye. "What do you want done with that?"

"I'll deal with her. I understand that you have pressing business in Salem and I won't keep you any longer."

"You're going to Salem?" Nez asked from behind me.

"Yes," I replied stepping back down and holstering the other gun.

"I have a friend in Salem and I know he needs assistance. He's under the power of a woman there, Sarah –"

"You mean Micky?" I asked knowingly.

"Yes. Micky George. If it's possible, I'd like to see him brought to Nashville." He looked wary making the request but he probably figured he didn't have anything to lose by asking.

"We'll do what we can," Bruce said.

"I would appreciate it. I can't go myself. If I do they will kill him."

"I'll send him," I promised. If he weren't being treated well I'd do what I could to help. We left a few minutes later and were on our way to the airport. I wanted to get home so bad I didn't care about anything else. I realized that Bruce was trying to get my attention and I blinked as I looked at him.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"Nothing."

"You're zoning," he prodded.

"Nothing," I repeated.

"Brenda, there's always something going on with you."

"I'm fine," I said a little too harshly and he didn't ask again. I really didn't mean to be rude or anything but now that the pressing matter of Wyatt was over I wanted to be gone. Out of here.

We arrived at the airport a short time later and found that everything was secure. I boarded the plane and removed Rafe's jacket that I had put on when we were still in our world. I went to the couch and sat there with my feet tucked under me without saying a word to anyone. Rafe came to sit next to me but didn't say anything. I really didn't notice. It was two in the morning and time was ticking away. We had to hurry.

Brenda, I heard in my head.

Yeah. It was Christina using our mental link.

Are you planning on staying in this world?

What are you talking about? I was outraged her would even suggest such a thing. It was impossible.

Just answer the question, she pressed and I looked across the plane to glare at her.

No.

Are you planning on getting back with Michael when we get back to our world?

That was almost too much. My eyes narrowed before I answered, *No*. What in the hell was she trying to prove?

Then why are you blowing it with the ghoul? she scolded. I glanced at Rafe then and saw that he was in deep study of his hands that were lying in his lap. Usually when we sat this close one of us had an arm around the other but I had been too distracted to notice.

What has he said? I asked.

It's what he hasn't said. And you know, he really reminds me of Luke that night he saw me going for the ring. I switched positions a little and put a foot on the floor. *Are you going to let this happen?*

No. I didn't know what I was going to do at the moment but I wasn't going to let this go on either. Rafe had to stop being so insecure about Michael. I loved the present, not the past. Michael and I were through and that was that.

Then you better do something about it, Christina interjected. I looked around for a place for us to talk and saw only the single bedroom in the back of the cabin. I stood and leaned over to grab Rafe's hand and pull on it gently.

"Come with me," I urged.

Chapter 34: Coming to Terms

*"Your hands are in my hair
but my heart is in your teeth baby
and it makes me want to make
you near me always."*

Jewel

"Near Me Always"

"Okay," he replied noncommittally. We went back to the bedroom and I closed the door behind us. Rafe looked incredibly depressed and I felt guilty because I knew his mood was my fault. He only acted this way when he thought about me going back to Michael. I pulled him over to the bed and we sat side by side. I had to turn his face for him to look at me.

"Are you alright?" I asked.

"Yeah. I'm fine."

"No, you're not." The numbness that had taken over my mind earlier was gone and I was thinking clearly again.

"Yes I am. Did everything go okay with the Master?" he asked trying to change the subject.

"Yeah. He's dead," I said with a small grin. "But I'm not worried about that." What I was worried about was Rafe's insecurities. They had to stop here and now and there was no way around it. I vowed Rafe would never again feel like the runner up to Michael Moorecock.

"Why would you, he's dead?" Rafe was trying really hard to sound blasé as he studied his hands in his lap. I didn't know if I wanted to strangle him or kiss him. I understood how he felt in a way. I couldn't count the amount of times I'd pictured Michael with other women after he first left and it made me feel more vulnerable than I could remember. How could I turn his feelings around?

"If you're thinking I want to stay here, you're wrong," I blurted out.

Rafe blinked as if he never expected me to bring the subject up. "Why would you think that, Brenda?"

"Oh, I don't know," I shrugged. "What are you thinking?" I didn't want him to feel like he was being put on the spot even though he was. Keep it light, I told myself.

He reached over and took my hand. "I'm trying not to," he replied with a stiff grin that faded as soon as it appeared.

"We have to get back," I insisted, squeezing his hand. My voice was a little breathless. "This isn't our life."

Rafe nodded. "That's the point, to get back." He sounded so unconvinced. Why couldn't he believe me that I didn't want to be with Michael anymore?

"We have to make sure those little girls have a mother." How could I make him understand that my concern was for Anna and Brenna? It wasn't their fault that some asshole thought it would be funny to switch their mother with a look alike that would eat them for dinner if she chose. Not only was it important to get home to help the Elvira, it was vital to get Brenda Moorecock back here for her children.

"Yeah," he agreed after a moment.

I wasn't getting through to him. Maybe it was too late. I stood, tears forming in my eyes as I walked to the other side of the room. What else could I say to make him believe

me? Thoughts were clouding my senses and I was unaware that Rafe had followed me until I felt his hands on my arms. "Brenda, what's wrong?"

"I don't want you to be upset with me," I sniffed as I rubbed my eyes.

"Why would I be?" he asked but I heard the edge still there.

"Because I feel that you think I wish this was my life or that I want to stay here." I turned in his arms to look into his eyes. The clear green pools mirrored my own concerns.

"And you don't?" He sounded a little surprised as he wiped blood tears from my cheeks.

"No, Rafe. This is not my life. This is something that can never happen for me. It's destined never to happen. And, I feel like shit because every time something happens about Michael I feel as if you get all insecure. That this is some game that you're going to be the loser in and that's not true." There, it was all on the table now. If Rafe and I are going to work out the decision was going to happen here and now. Either he believed me or when we got back to our world I would cut him loose. Even though the thought of that broke my heart.

"I know you love him," he began hesitantly. "I know that if given the choice that's the kind of life you would have had. You would have had the house with the white picket fence and the two point five kids and a dog in the backyard. I know that's what you would have wanted and it's not something you can have in our world so why wouldn't I think you wanted to stay here?"

"Rafe, how can I stay here?" I implored, tears forming in my eyes again. "How could I stay here even if I wanted to?" Michael had already made it crystal clear what he thought of the vampiric me. Even if I wanted to stay here I would be left all alone and that wasn't a life.

He shook his head. "I don't know. You can't deny that this would be what you wanted."

I was starting to get angry now. Why couldn't he just believe me? "Who doesn't want the perfect life?" I raged loudly. "Wouldn't you like to have the house with th-

"Well I wouldn't want to live next door to you knowing you were married to Michael," Rafe exclaimed.

I calmed and started over. "I understand that. It's just something that's not going to happen and I can accept that."

"And in our world Michael is an asshole."

"Yes." I knew that better than anyone.

"What if tomorrow he wasn't an asshole?" Rafe asked, eyeing me speculatively. "What would you do then?"

I thought a second before replying. Even if Michael were to change it wouldn't make a difference between what had happened with him and I. Yes, I still had feelings for Michael but I wasn't going to take the chance of him hurting me again. I wouldn't live through another rejection like that. "I'd be happy for him," I finally answered with a shrug.

"And that's it?"

"Yes, Rafe. I am committed to you. I have spent the last two years of my life putting Michael out of my mind." I knew what I was saying was true. If it wasn't I would never have gotten involved with Rafe in the first place. Tears were forming in my eyes again and I could also hear someone in the back of my head crying as well. I realized that I hadn't let the mental link go and I was still connected with Christina.

"But you can't deny you still love him," Rafe was accusing.

I didn't take the time to break the connection. "I will always have feelings for him," I admitted, not for the first time.

"Jesus, I hate that line," he cursed as he looked away. He would have stepped out of my grasp if I hadn't grabbed his arms and held him there.

"Rafe, I'm sorry. He was my first love. You will always have feelings for your first love and I'm not going to hold that against you because I can't change it." Didn't he know how much I wanted to put those feelings behind me? I couldn't stop loving Michael any easier than I could my own father. Michael was a part of my life that I will never forget just like Rafe himself was. Why couldn't he see that?

I must have made some sense because Rafe pulled me against his chest then and kissed the top of my head. "I won't be so quick to think that way. I promise," he vowed. "I know that you love me and I love you. And I don't want to drive you away with my suspicions."

I lifted my head from his chest and looked up at him. "I don't want to drive you away by letting you continue to think that way. I won't leave you, Rafe. That's not what I want. I want you. I want us to be together."

"That's what I want, too." He kissed my waiting lips and I sobbed against his mouth. *Brenda*, I heard my sister in my head and I started to giggle.

"What?" Rafe asked, pulling back with a wry smile. "Did I tickle you?"

"No. Christina," I choked out.

"You're not doing the mind..." he trailed off.

"I didn't realize it was still there."

"Lovely," he drawled and I kissed him again as I said goodbye to Christina and shut off the link.

We moved to the bed and held each other for the rest of the flight. Before the plane landed Nina called to let us know that the Angel from our world had just switched with his counterpart. She reported that he knew a ritual that would take us all back but in order to do it, he needed Elvira's ring.

She also dropped another bomb of sorts. Evidently, Cormac had killed the Micky from this world. She didn't elaborate on the reason why and I couldn't believe the liberties the guy was taking. For the most part, the people I had encountered here had the same basic personalities of those that I knew. I couldn't imagine Micky being so far off key that Cormac had found it necessary to kill him. I wasn't happy about the situation but it was a little late now. I wouldn't be able to keep my promise to Nez by sending Micky to him and my heart felt heavy. I owed my dear friend so much and I had looked on the simple task as a way of repaying some of the debt.

Chapter 35: New Salem

*"Blind in my fear, I was escaping just to feel."
10,000 Maniacs
"Circle Dream"*

I hung up with Nina, telling her we'd be there soon, and Rafe and I joined the others to let them know what was happening. We landed in Salem around three in the morning and found a limousine waiting to take us to Jesters. The streets of this Salem were very different from the town I knew. Like Nashville, the downtown area was filled with closed businesses and people who lived on the edge of humanity. How could Elvira let this happen? The only reason I could think of was that she really had no idea.

Even Jesters was different. The layout was the same but the music was hard and heavy, the lyrics twisted. There was lots of leather and tattoos on the patrons and we quickly made our way to the doors that led to the conference room where our friends waited.

I was busy checking out the surroundings as we made our way through the crowded bar. I was having a hard time believing that this place was related in any way to the Jester's I knew. The lights were low and there was a thick layer of smoke through the room. Rafe took my hand and I squeezed it reassuringly and gave him a slight smile.

My heart dropped when I glanced once again at the door we were heading to. Not only had Christina went directly to the unguarded door but she had already gone through it. The rest of us quickly caught up but by the time I got to the door myself, my sister was at the top of the stairs.

"Chris," I hissed. Damn, did she always just walk into sticky situations without taking the time to check things out?

"What?" she asked as she turned.

"Ah, do you want to get shot?" I replied lowly. "Do you want to just walk into something blindly? Have you forgotten everything you know?" Based on the stories she had told me I thought she would have more common sense by now.

She leaned back against the door jam and we exchanged pointed looks. *You may be the Mother*, she said in my head, *but you're not my mother.*

If you didn't act like an impertinent child then perhaps I wouldn't have to act like your mother. I understand you have a strong need to return to our world but, -she pulled her weapon and checked the clip before putting it back in its holster – it won't do Jason any good if you get yourself killed.

"Reow," she replied out loud.

I started up the stairs, pulling a Glock on the way. Just as I reached the door at the top it opened and Cormac stood there. "Ladies."

"Is she always like this?" Bruce asked Christina.

She glanced back at him and rolled her eyes. "You've been with her for the last two years. You should know this. How ya doin', Cormac?" she asked turning to the man in the doorway.

"Can we enter please?" he asked and stepped aside enough for us to file in.

"Yeah, it's chilly out here," Christina replied going in and I rolled my eyes. Sometimes, my sister can be a real shit head.

"Mind the blood stain and the bitch in the chair," he said without feeling. We walked in the conference room and I was horrified to see the bloody remains of a man lying on the table. When I looked closer I was thrown even further to recognize that the body was Micky.

I was shocked. Thanks to Nina, I already knew he was dead but to see the body was still a surprise.

Christina had taken up position leaning against the wall while Bruce and Rachel stood together close to the door. Cormac shut and locked it then went to stand by a girl that looked like Eliza, my piece of shit van girl. Faith was there as well and when Rachel recognized her she went to kiss the other vampire's jugular vein in some kind of odd greeting. Angel was there as well and we exchanged nods as I glanced at my watch. It was almost three-thirty. The night was wasting away.

"He's looked better," Bruce commented, eyeing the body.

Sarah was sitting in a chair across the table from where Christina stood. Tied up was more like it. She was dressed in tight, black leather. Not at all like the Sarah I knew.

"Why is she tied up in the chair?" Bruce asked with a frown.

Rafe had come up behind me and had placed a hand at the small of my back. I was trembling a little at the sight of Micky's body. I looked around the room for something to cover what remained of Micky's head and saw a bandana tied around Sarah's arm. I had to pass Cormac to get to her. "Nice job," I mumbled when I walked by.

"Thank you," he replied evenly. His very demeanor was cold and calculating. I found it hard to believe that Christina trusted him so much. She was usually a good judge of character but this guy was a dick. He had no respect for others and didn't care that he showed it. I promised myself that I wasn't going to let this guy get to me. We had to work together to get home.

As I approached her I felt the familiar power roll from her like a strong perfume but again, it didn't influence me. When it became apparent what I was doing Cormac said evenly, "Don't touch her please." Like I was going to listen to him. What harm would it do?

"Go ahead. Take it," Sarah purred. For the hell of it I tried a little Presence of my own but wasn't sure how well it worked. A shadow dropped over her eyes like a blindfold and I smiled a little as I continued to reach for the bandana. Sometimes Bruce's Obtenebration came in handy.

"Don't say I didn't warn you," Cormac said as my fingers closed around the fabric. Out of nowhere a small cut appeared on the back of my hand. Apparently these vampires have other abilities that I haven't found out about yet. I brought my hand to my mouth and tried to lick the small wound closed but when it didn't work, I had to manipulate my blood instead. I glanced over my shoulder to Nina and commented, "She appears to be a bitch."

"Why thank you, thank you very much," Sarah said with a wide smile. She wasn't intimidated at all that she couldn't see.

Cormac came up then and tried to elbow me out of the way. Like that was going to happen. When I didn't move he went to Sarah's other side and sat on the table in front of her. He had a gun in his hand. "I killed Micky like the dog he was," he said in the same cool tone as he pointed the gun to her forehead. "And I will kill you like the bitch you are." He nudged her head with the tip of the barrel before continuing. "Knock it off and shut up. One word and I'll pull the trigger."

Bruce interjected. "Cormac, right now she is the only person in this room with knowledge of this area."

"Like hell she is," he ground out. Then without taking his gaze off Sarah he said, "Bruce, have you met the other Cormac's wife, Eliza?"

"Greetings, my lady," he said with a slight bow that she didn't acknowledge.

"Your rash actions have already cost one life tonight," I said. "Do we really need to make it two?" I didn't know how they did things in Los Angeles but it appeared like they killed first and asked questions later, when it was too late.

"Brenda," Nina began, "you've said yourself, she's a bitch."

"That doesn't mean she doesn't have information we don't need to know," I pointed out. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. It was like the most basic of interrogation tactics had been thrown out the window.

"She's been like this all night long," she countered.

I've never met two people who were so quick to kill. Even Michael had spent some time in Los Angeles so I knew it was a hard city but good God, it wasn't that bad. Didn't they take the time to learn *anything* before pulling the trigger? "Maybe she's mentally linked with the Master," I suggested, "and they know everything we're saying."

"Drop it," Cormac was telling Sarah and the power surge fell off. "Thank you." I still wanted to cover the bloody mess across the table and reached again for the bandana. "Please don't," he said.

"I just want to cover Micky's head," I said, pointing at the body.

"He doesn't have a head anymore." His cold demeanor was disheartening. I was having trouble understanding how someone could be that uncaring and still have the beast under control.

"What's left of it," I conceded. The shadow around Sarah's eyes dispersed and Cormac pulled the gun from her head and put it on the table next to him.

Sarah settled the matter. "By all means," she said lifting her arm to make it easier to remove the fabric. "I don't like to look at dinner when I can't have it."

I rolled my eyes, annoyed with her mean streak and took the scarf. I rounded the table again and carefully draped the scarf over what was left of Micky's head.

"You may speak," Cormac was telling Sarah, "nicely."

"Puppy was her human servant," she smirked. "You hurt him and you hurt her. The question is, how badly?"

I watched her, trying to gage how much I could trust her. I didn't sense that she was lying and her aura said nothing of it either. If I understood her correctly, domitor's of this world have a physical bond with their ghouls. Now we were getting somewhere. Knowledge like that was unbelievably useful. "So there is a bond between them?" I asked, coming back around to stand next to her again.

"Yes," Sarah said like I should know. From the corner of my eye I saw Faith's head nod from her position near the door.

"So right now she's probably not too happy," Bruce commented to no one in particular.

I had an idea. I knew that at higher levels of Auspex it was possible to communicate with others. It was a lot like the ability that I shared with my sire and Christina and Michael but it could be used on any one. I have been concentrating my studies lately on developing my own Auspex abilities in the hopes of one-day being able to advance to that level. I wondered if I could contact Elvira if I tried. I sat down in an empty chair next to Sarah and closed my eyes, intent on trying. I developed a mental image of my mentor in my mind and tried to detect her thoughts on a sub-conscience level.

After a minute or two I felt a stab of pain and felt sure it was Elvira. I sensed she was fighting to control the pain and I lent her what mental strength I could. After a few minutes the pain eased enough for me to send out a mental message to her. *Be strong. All is not lost yet.*

Chapter 36: Conversation with an Old Friend

*"We're all held captive
out from the sun
a sun that shines on only some."*

Creed

"My Own Prison"

I understood her shock. If I were her I would feel very violated right now but it had to be done. *Who are you?* she asked.

I am one who comes here seeking to aid you in your plight. The Elvira I knew understood the importance of having others there to back her up. I hoped this Elvira was the same.

What is it you want of me? Her tone was suspicious and I knew I had my work cut out for me. I had to get her to agree to help us without giving her too much information. It would be very hard because I already had such trust in the woman that I knew. I had to remember she wasn't the Elvira I knew.

Your help, I replied.

To do what?

Assist you to become the strong leader I know you are. It wasn't all bullshit. I knew Elvira had what it took to turn the city around.

If you already know I am a strong leader, how do you think you can help me?

I know whose influence you are under. Her surprise registered again and I was sorry to exploit her weakness.

Who is this? she demanded. It wasn't prudent to divulge anything about myself yet. I didn't know how much I could trust this version of Elvira. I projected an image of Beth and Akari to her in hopes of establishing exactly how much I knew about her situation. *You are not either of those,* she commented.

No, I am not.

Who are you? she repeated.

You do not know me.

What is it then you think I can help you with? I was surprised at the amount of control she was showing. I must have peaked her interest enough for she to continue listening.

There is something of yours I need to borrow for a short time.

What would that be? I thought of her ring and I knew she saw it when I once again registered her surprise. *What do you need that for?*

To return to the place I need to be.

Where is that? I sent a picture of the Bathori Mansion, as I knew it and she soon replied. You need my ring to get to my house?

Do you see any differences?

Some that could be explained by your difference of perception, she countered.

Could be. I decided to take a little plunge. *I am not from this place.*

Suspicion rose from her again as she asked, Where are you from?

An alternative one.

You said you're here to help me. What would you do? I pictured Akari and Beth's headless bodies and she asked, And you would you do that? When did you plan on attempting this coup?

At your closest convenience, I replied as I attempted to see if she were lying. She wasn't.

Yours or mine?

Mine.

And when would that be? I could tell she was warming to the idea.

As soon as I can get to them.

I can try to arrange for you to get to them.

When?

Are you in town?

I'm closer than you think. It was hard to maintain the ambiguity but I had to.

Are you aware of the club opening tomorrow night? I received a picture of the front of Guilty Pleasures that closely resembled the one I had helped oversee construction of for the Prince. I remembered that the same club was scheduled to open in my Salem as well, leading me to assume that at least some things happened at the same time in this world as well.

They will be there with me tomorrow night, Elvira was saying.

And can I trust you? I asked.

Can I trust you? she countered.

Do you have the ability to sense whether I'm lying to you or not?

Yes.

Then yes, you can trust me.

You can trust me as well.

She wasn't lying either and relief flooded through me. *I'd hoped that your soul was the same.*

My soul? The club opens at sundown. We'll be there at seven.

Very good. I saw an image of a door that I recognized in the side of the building. *Is this my way in?*

It's my way in.

Very good. The connection broke then and I blinked open my eyes, feeling really drained. I glanced around the room and saw that all eyes were on me.

"So what kind of spooky-boo, Bren?" my sister asked.

"Excedrin," I replied shakily as Rafe moved around the table to stand behind me. "The little mind trick our sire taught us has paid off."

"Really? I'm assuming you didn't get a hold of our sire?"

"No. The Master of this city." There was an audible inhalation from Sarah.

"You really need to teach me that," Bruce said sincerely and we both laughed.

Christina piped in to say, "We need to teach a lot of people that, but we need to check with Antonio first."

"Yes," I nodded, "and the council."

"How did you get a hold of the Master of the city?" Faith asked, astonished.

"Is this not an ability you have?" No use in letting her in on our secret. The pain in my temple was increasing and I put a finger to the effected area. I felt Rafe's hands on my shoulders and that anchored me to continue being a part of the conversation.

"Not to snap my fingers and talk to the Master, no. Not that I'd want to," she mused. She then turned to Bruce to ask, "Is she crazy?"

"It's some crazy, mental spooky-boo thing," he informed her.

"What is spooky-boo?"

"Magic. You know, poof." He flicked his fingers outward and allowed shadows to spring out and tickle her cheek before recoiling back to his hand. Rachel giggled in astonishment.

"How much do you have her under control?" I asked Cormac. I was still feeling pretty weak and had a killer headache so I didn't want to get into any kind of skirmish until I felt better.

He glanced at the woman nonchalantly before answering. "Well enough for the moment."

"Can we discuss strategy in front of her?" I glanced at her myself and saw that she was trying in vain to appear innocent. I already knew I wouldn't but maybe if she thought we were starting to trust her she would let something slip.

"I would prefer not to."

"Very well. Shall we go upstairs then? Has anyone been up there?" The pain was subsiding a little so it was easier to think about the next step that we had to take.

"Yes. It's like you said it would be," Nina said.

From the corner of my eyes I saw someone approached the body on the table. I turned my head in time to see Eliza pulling a cross from the waistband of Micky's pants and put it in her pocket. "I think I can keep an eye on them for you," she said, indicating Faith and Rachel with her thumb.

"Let me guess," I asked rather dryly. "You're a hunter, aren't you?"

"Yeah," she said with a grin. "Why am I in your world, too? He said he doesn't know me." She indicated Cormac with a trace of sadness in her dark eyes. This version of the woman seemed a little softer than the one I knew. Don't get me wrong, she was still hard around the edges but there was an underlying sense of contentment. I assumed it was happiness.

"Yeah, as far as I can tell. We've had a few run-ins." I looked at Cormac, who was holding another gun in his left hand. "Are you leaving her in charge?"

"Do you have a better choice?"

"I really don't know." I turned to Faith, "Sorry."

"Sometimes you just have to have faith," Bruce lamented as he gave Rachel's hand a squeeze and we headed for the door that led upstairs, Christina in the lead.

As her hand reached for the door she stopped and turned to Angel. "Did anyone else flip?"

He had remained silent, keeping an eye on the group and waiting for the time when we had the ring so he could perform the ritual. "No. As far as I know this is everybody."

She had been asking about Jason and I was glad he was waiting in Salem. We'll see him soon, I thought to myself and with that we went upstairs.

Chapter 37: Making Plans

*"So sign up all you raw recruits
throw away those designer mits"*

Meatloaf

"Everything Larger Than Everything Else"

"Have a seat," I said upon entering the living room. "I'm going to look for refreshments." I went to the lab area where I knew there were blood bags stashed in my world. I wasn't low by any means but I didn't think it a bad idea to fill up if I had the chance and no telling what condition the others were in. I looked in the usual place and found nothing so I started looking in others cabinets.

"Are you looking for something specific, Brenda?" I turned and found that Cormac had followed.

"I'm a little down. I'd like to go into this situation full but there isn't anything here." I wondered why he had followed me.

Cormac went to the door of the lab and opened it. "Nina, do you still have the box?"

I heard the young woman answer and soon she popped her head in the door. In her hand was a box I hadn't noticed before.

"We do have some blood on tap," Cormac said. I assumed it was the box Christina had mentioned earlier and when I saw it I knew who it belonged to.

"Antonio," I breathed.

"Yeah," Nina said with a slight smile.

"Cool. Gotta love dad at certain times." Nina lifted the lid and held it out for me. I looked inside and saw that the bottom of the box was covered in clear blue stones that swirled with beautiful colors. The box also held a small tray that sat on a ledge of the box to stay separate from the others. The tray also held swirling stones but these were topaz in color and there were far less than the blue. They belonged to Antonio's old companion, Idella. She is the Tremere Primogen in Las Vegas and far more powerful than my sire. I didn't want to take them. We might need powerful blood later if things got hairy so I didn't want to waste them.

I allowed my fingers to glide along a few of the blue stones in the bottom of the box and felt my sire's blood course through my veins once again.

"Do you know the difference?" Nina asked.

"Well, those are Antonio's," I said, pointing to the blues. "And the others belong to someone he's known for a long time and will give you a boost."

"What about everyone else?" Rafe asked with a nod at the door.

"There's enough there. I'm sure Antonio wouldn't mind. I believe Bruce is down and I don't know what Chris has been doing." With that we returned to the living room. Nina told me that Antonio had lent her the box when she and Cormac had last seen him in Los Angeles. "Nina has Capri Sun dots," I announced. Those that wanted to feed from the box then Cormac and Bruce went downstairs to check on the others.

"So what's our plan?" I asked. "Where are we going to sleep?"

"Good idea," Angel replied. "Do you know who lives here?"

"Sarah does, right Nina?" I turned to the girl.

"Yes. Sarah owns Jesters so it's safe to assume we'll be secure here."

We agreed that the living accommodations would be safe enough to stay in for the day. Rafe and Eliza were here and could help stand watch during the day and I was sure there had to be some kind of security in place. We started laying down some groundwork for what

would happen the next night. When Bruce and Cormac rejoined us I informed them that I had made contact with Elvira and had struck up a deal of sorts. We would get rid of Beth and Akari and she would let us "borrow" her ring.

"I thought Elvira in this world was a bad guy," Christina commented. "Can we trust her?"

"We can trust her as far as we need to. I know the rest of you don't but Bruce and I have a certain amount of loyalty to this person. If she shows me that she isn't worthy of my loyalty than she won't have it." My eyes fell on Rafe and I realized how tired he looked. I asked him to find feathers so the Tremere of the company could perform the ritual and he went off.

The ladies were brought up from conference room and it was decided that Eliza would take the first watch, giving Rafe the opportunity to get some rest first. Rafe found feathers and they were dispersed to those who could use them. I told him to go find somewhere to get some sleep and I would find him later.

After Rafe went off down the hall that led to the two bedrooms, Cormac approached me and asked if he could have a word in private. I was a little hesitant at first but agreed. Up to this point Cormac had been condescending and rude to me and I couldn't imagine what he wanted. The living room was pretty large so we went off to one side to have our discussion.

When we alone Cormac said that he was interested in my telepathic abilities and asked if it worked on anyone. I explained that our sire with the consent of the council taught the ability that I shared with Christina to me.

"I am not asking to learn it," he explained. "I was merely wondering if you could contact anyone else like you did with Elvira tonight. If I am to be in a room full of enemies tomorrow night it would be helpful to be able to contact you if I was in trouble."

"Well, I haven't really tried. Contacting Elvira was pure luck but if you want me to try I will."

"As you wish." He seemed a little disconcerted at my inability and said we would work it out.

Eliza produced a sketch of Guilty Pleasures but it wasn't the same layout that I was familiar with. The club didn't officially open until tomorrow night but she explained that she was starting to work there and that was how she knew it so well. I took a moment to look over the sketch to reestablish my bearings with the differences. We grouped around each other and decided that the best place to ambush Elvira and her party was in a room where the Master's private elevator opened. Apparently that was where the door led that Elvira had shown to me during our mental conversation and Eliza agreed to help us get into the room where the elevator opened.

Cormac commented that he thought the ambush should happen as soon as possible. He and Nina had found out during their time with Sarah that an attempt was going to be made on Elvira's life tomorrow at eight o'clock. Evidently, Sarah was in league with my old buddy Malachi and a few others that I knew from Salem. Among them was someone that I hadn't heard of in a long time.

Father Abraham was the leader of the Cenaculum when Elvira had been kidnapped and apparently he still lived in this world. Between Bruce and myself we were able to bring the others up to speed on what the players looked like and any other idiosyncrasies we could think of.

Dawn was fast approaching so we finalized our plans and prepared to bed down for the day. I found Rafe in the extra bedroom. He hadn't fallen asleep yet and when I entered he sat up. "Everything okay?" he asked.

There was a knock at the door before I had a chance to respond. "Come in."

It was Cormac. He'd been told there were extra clothes in the closet and he wanted to pick out something before he went to sleep. Without preamble he gave a huge gun complete with a harness to wear under a trench coat to Rafe and excused himself. Time was quickly slipping away so we got into bed and I performed the Wake With Mornings Freshness ritual and we slept.

Eliza had made the arrangements and by six-thirty the next evening we were in position at Guilty Pleasures. Bruce and Rachel were waiting on the other side of a door that opened to a stairwell to the main level of the bar while the rest of us lurked by the elevator. The room was situated so that the elevator was nestled in one corner, leaving a large space next to it that was a big blind spot to someone coming off the elevator itself. That was where most of us waited.

We had brought Sarah along because we didn't want to leave her at Jesters to be discovered by her friends and tell them of our plans. Angel and Faith were keeping an eye on her in one corner so she didn't cause us any problems. Cormac was on the wall where the elevator shaft was located while Nina, Rafe and myself waited on the wall opposite them.

My only concern was that when bullets started to fly Beth and Akari would be able to slip back into the elevator and escape. The controls were on the opposite side of the elevator from where we waited so the only thing I could think of was to put Christina there to destroy the controls.

"Christina, your job is to disable the elevator as soon as everyone is off it," I told her as we settled in.

"Okay," she replied with a nervous laugh, "just don't shoot me or anything." The elevator mechanisms engaging ceased any more conversation. I glanced at Rafe and gave him a reassuring smile that he returned. He was like a kid with a new toy with that huge gun.

We all heard the mechanisms trigger that started the elevator. The time had come for us to go into action and I felt the familiar adrenaline rush spring into my veins and I took a final glance around the room. Everyone was ready.

The doors opened and Akari walked out into the room, glancing around. Beth was just starting out when Akari caught sight of Rafe and I and went for a gun under his jacket. I aimed and fired.

Chapter 38: What Have I Done?

*“And through the life force
and there goes her friend”*

Tori Amos

“Bells For Her”

The phosphorous round hit Christina in the side. If she hadn't already had her back against the wall the force of the impact would have put her there anyway. She managed to keep her position long enough to fire at Akari and hit him in the shoulder but then her gun hand fell to her side.

I was aware of other shoots being fired in the small room but I stood in horror. I shot Christina. The thought roared through my head as I watched her sink to the floor and I couldn't help but remember how I had felt when the other Rafe told me the Christina of this world was killed by the other me. Her coat and shirt were red with her blood. Thankfully she hadn't ignited but that wasn't a great comfort.

I was brought back to reality when a bullet hit the wall between Rafe and I. She would need blood and my only thought was to get to Christina to see how bad it was. I dodged past flying bullets and bodies to get to her. She was barely conscious and I felt the tears flow down my cheeks.

“Nice shot, Brenda,” she half laughed, half coughed as I knelt beside her. Nina came up then and I turned to her.

“Where's the box?” I asked. Nina brought it forward without a word and I took Christina's hand to help guide it inside. In order for her to take in the blood she would have to touch the stones herself and I guided her fingers to the ones that belonged to Idella. It would be more helpful now for Christina to use the more powerful blood. I carefully lowered her hand so I could check her side and saw that the wound wasn't bleeding anymore. That much was good.

Gunfire continued to fly around us and I was aware that Rafe was now at my side along with Nina. I assumed he was keeping an eye on our backs but frankly I didn't care at the moment. I helped Christina take more 'blood' from the box but every time I examined the wound I found that it wasn't closing. I knew it was bad. As Kindred, we can heal most wounds almost instantaneously with the exception of fire, sunlight and slashes from Protean or Lupine claws. Since the round I had used was phosphorus and therefore fire Christina would have to rest continually for many nights before the wound totally went away. We had to get the ring and return home as soon as possible.

The shooting had stopped and when I glanced over my shoulder I saw that everything was under control. Cormac was facing Elvira; ashes littered the floor between them. He was holding his hand out to her as he said, “Your ring, my lady.” She removed a silver ring from her hand and gave it to Cormac who in turn handed it to Angel.

“Now we just need somewhere to do the ritual,” he said as he put the ring in the pocket of his black pants and regarded the rest of the group for ideas.

“The building next door is empty,” Elvira suggested. Christina was still conscious and I helped her get comfortable until we figured out our next step.

“What do we do now?” Faith asked Elvira.

“We let these people go next door and do what they have to and we'll take care of everything else,” Elvira replied as her eyes swept over the rest of us. She looked as if she wanted to say something else but didn't.

"Where will you be at eight o'clock?" Cormac asked. He hadn't put away any of his guns even though the others had and he stood ready to use them again.

"Probably here why?"

"Just wondering. Be careful," he replied then started to walk toward us. It wasn't necessary for Cormac to tell Elvira about the attempted coup that was scheduled. Faith knew already but I thought it was rude not to tell the woman herself.

"Are you sure it's okay to give her those?" Nina asked. She must have just realized what blood I was giving Christina.

"Mm-hmm. It's fine."

"Whose are they?" Cormac asked stopping a few feet from where Christina was propped against the wall.

"Idella," was all I said. We left Guilty Pleasures then and headed for the building next door. Rachel and Eliza went with us. The door was locked but that didn't stop us. There was a window in the door that Eliza broke with her elbow before reaching in to unlock it and we filed in.

Once inside the building we quickly formed a circle as Angel pulled a plastic bag of dirt from his pocket and began to sprinkle it in an eight-foot circle around us. After he was done Angel put a leaf on each of the four compass points and handed each of us a rust colored stone. I pressed Christina's into her hand and helped her hold it.

Cormac took out one of his pistols and removed all but one of the phosphorus rounds and bent over to leave it at his feet. "For your husband's safety," he said to Eliza and she nodded in understanding.

Good-byes were quickly made to our new friends but all I wanted to do was get home. Christina was in bad shape and she needed to get into bed and fast. Rachel and Eliza stepped back so they didn't flip with us and Angel gave us a chant to recite. From the center of the circle came the familiar flash of light before everything went black.

In the visions I was back behind the counter at Caesar's and seeing Michael for the first time. Then I saw again the first time he fed his blood to me, fully introducing the world of eternal night to me. Finally I was looking at Rafe propped against the door of my bedroom at the Bathori Mansion. He was covered in his own blood and I fed him from my wrist in hopes of saving his life.

Chapter 39: Home Again, Home Again

*"I don't need your sympathy
there's nothing you can say or do for me"
Cher
"Strong Enough"*

I found myself standing in a rather nice cell with Rafe, Bruce and Cormac. Christina had passed out during the flip and I still held her in my arms so as gently as possible, I lowered the both of us to the floor and I cradled her head in my lap. Bruce had lost consciousness during the flip too and Rafe was helping his lifeless body to the floor. I glanced around the room trying to get my bearings.

I thought we were in the Guilty Pleasures of our world but I wasn't totally sure. There was an L-shaped couch that dominated two of the walls of the room. On another were a large screen television and shelves filled with videocassettes. I also recognized a door leading to a bathroom. The door that I assumed was the one out of the high-class cell held a large pane of what was probably bulletproof two-way glass. I wondered who was on the other side.

Christina needed more blood so I carefully laid her head on the floor and went to the door. After finding that it was locked I banged on it hard and called out, "Micky, are you out there? I need blood." Almost instantaneously it open revealing Zane. "Zane," I said breathlessly. "We need blood. Christina's been shot."

"How'd that happen?" he asked as he raised a communicator and called for the substance. "Yeah, they're back."

I returned to Christina and took her head in my lap as Nina appeared with my sire's box in hand again and headed directly toward us.

"Isn't it getting rather low?" Cormac asked.

"Not really," she replied, dropping to her knees.

I really didn't want to deal with this asshole right now. I glanced up at him and said coolly, "In actuality, it's her sire's. I don't think he's going to mind."

"It is her adopted sire," he countered. Who the fuck cared if Antonio was her adopted sire or not? Did it make her claim to using his blood any less urgent than if it were me or Cormac for that matter? Not for the first time I found myself wondering who this guy thought he was but right now Christina was more important so I let the comment drop.

"Get Frasier," I said to Zane. Maybe what she needed was fresh vitae, besides I knew he'd want to be here.

"I think they're on their way."

"What's the matter?" I heard Jason from the hallway just before he and Frasier filled the doorway into the room. Jason hesitated for a second but Frasier came straight to Christina's side and kneeled there.

"Brenda shot her," Cormac informed Jason. Realization filled his eyes and Jason came to Christina as well. He tried to push past Frasier and the other man hesitated for a moment before allowing Jason to get closer. Frasier didn't go far however.

Jason examined her before looking to me. "How bad is she?" he asked.

"Bad enough," I replied as I gently passed her torso over to him. He cradled her and I knew that somehow, someday everything was going to be okay. It had to.

One thing I knew for sure was that I had no business using much less carrying a gun. I didn't know how I was going to make this up to my sister but I would spend the rest of eternity trying. I stood and Rafe was there instantly. He moved to take me into his arms but

I stopped him with my hand before lifting my jacket from my sides to reveal the pair of Glocks that hung in their holsters. "Take them," I told him.

"Brenda, don't be stupid. You know you're going to need them. The Sabbath are here."

"Just take them." From over my shoulder I heard Jason sobbing against my sister's head and that strengthened my resolve. Rafe's eye closed briefly before he reached in and took the guns from their holsters and put them in the big pockets of his trench coat. I turned and continued, "There's one in the back, too." I felt him remove the PPK as well and a weight lifted from my shoulders.

Brother Stephen entered then and he and Cormac went to a corner of the room for a private conference. Nina was helping Christina take more blood from the box and I noticed that Bruce was starting to stir. There were a thousand things I should be doing. Find Elvira. Arrange to get Christina back to the Chantry. Nothing seemed important though. I was numb to the core. Rafe tried to pull me into his arms again and this time I let him.

Bruce was fully awake now and sat up rubbing his head. "What is the saying? 'Did anyone get the number of that truck?'" He was trying to be funny but no one felt like laughing right now, especially me.

Christina's face contorted in pain and she started to come around. Jason's sobs ceased and he quickly wiped most of the blood tears from his face. I watched her blue eyes open and opened my mind to the physical pain she felt. When she saw Jason she smiled slightly. "Jason. I had the strangest dream. You were missing and I couldn't find you." Her voice was thick and her eyes hadn't focused yet. "You wouldn't let me find you," she continued, her brow furrowed slightly. "Luke helped me look for you." She stopped and really looked at him for the first time.

"Don't worry now," he soothed. "The dream is over." She tried to sit up but winced at the effort. Jason eased her down again and she asked, "It wasn't a dream was it?" She touched her side and winced again while at the same time brought her other hand up to touch Jason's cheek. "Where are we?"

"In a church," he returned with a slight grin.

"Church? Where?"

"In Salem." He jostled Christina accidentally and she winced. He soothed her quietly and said, "I thought I was going to lose you. I love you."

Nina stood and leaving the box next to Christina went to a corner of the room where she produced a letter and read it.

"Something seems different," Christina said looking around. "Where's Brenda?" I was just about to walk away until she spoke.

"She's right here," Jason told her.

"I'm here, Chris."

"Did we make it back to the right place?"

"Yeah."

"You're sure?" She looked to Jason and back to me. "You're sure?" she asked again.

"Jason and Frasier ran here fast enough." Christina saw Frasier for the first time and he edged closer.

"Haven't I taught you anything yet?" he asked as he wiped her face. "You're supposed to dodge."

"I can't dodge when my sister is shooting me," she smiled weakly and tears formed in my eyes again. I felt Rafe's arms tighten around me as Jason pulled something from his pocket. I recognized the ring that Jason had given her when they pretended to be married on

that fateful trip to Russia. When she left the Holding Christina had left the ring with the letter telling Jason where she would be.

Nina was helped Bruce to his feet after she returned her letter to her pocket. Then the pair stood by in case Christina needed anything else. Cormac and Stephen were still talking quietly. It appeared as if there was a revelation of some kind going on.

"I don't know if this is annoying or if I'm getting used to it," Bruce said as he straightened his coat. When he looked at me he saw the blood tears on my cheeks and concern filled his features. "What's going on?"

Nina informed him of what happened while he was out and he nodded his head. "Accidents happen," he told me.

Cormac and Stephen were done with their talk and Cormac quickly changed into a tuxedo that was waiting for him. He didn't actually don the outfit properly, just threw it on enough to be covered. There were still traces of blood on his skin and the bow tie hung around his neck instead of being tied. He wore a trench coat over it all.

After she put the ring on her finger Christina looked at Jason peculiarly. "What's different? Something is different here."

"You're covered in blood."

"No. About you."

"I got a haircut," he grinned.

She laughed feebly and winced at the effort. "What's different?" He took her hand and held it to his face. She stiffened and her eyes found me again. "Ah, Brenda. I don't think we hit the right place."

"You hit the right place," he confirmed.

"Christina, everything is fine. You're back now." Frasier told her.

She wasn't convinced. "I don't think we're in Kansas yet."

"No. You're in Salem. Last time I saw you we were in Ramadan and I was pretty funky looking. Now we're here."

"Where you're not."

"A last gift from God."

"God doesn't exist. If he did why would he help us? Aren't we beyond the pale? Damned for all eternity?"

"If God didn't exist then Caine wouldn't. And therefore we wouldn't exist," Bruce pointed out.

"Back handed logic," Christina responded.

"In a round about way, yes," Stephen joined the conversation. "If God did not exist than why am I here? I have found my uncle after years of searching."

"Coincidence."

"And I wouldn't be able to be here with you, like this," Jason told her in a low voice. Christina started to cry then and Jason hugged her to him carefully. Christina sat up stiffly then. She looked a little bit better but I could tell she was still in a great deal of pain.

Zane popped his head in to let us know arrangements had been made to take Christina back to the Chantry. He also said formal attire had been brought over for all of us. We should change and meet Elvira on the main floor.

Rafe and I went to the bathroom and quickly changed. "Here let me," he said coming up behind me. My emotions were still dazed and Rafe had to zip up the gray wool gown for me because my hands were shaking.

"Thank you," I whispered. I was trying to pull myself together there was still so much to do. I was sure the Sabbath had been using their time wisely while we were gone and we had to be brought up to speed.

"She's going to be okay, you know." Rafe's hands had moved up to my bare shoulders where he gave them a slight squeeze.

Fresh tears started in my eyes but I didn't let them fall. "She has to be," I replied in a quiet voice. I glanced over my shoulder and gave him a small smile. "You look quite dashing." And he did. The tuxedo looked as if it had been tailored especially for him.

"Oh, this old thing," he joked, trying to lighten my mood. "I've had it for ever." He turned toward the door and offered me his arm. "Come on. Elvira is probably waiting."

Chapter 40: Seeing Michael Again

*"Somewhere there's somebody who looks just like you do
acts just like you too - feels the same way"*
Edie Brickell & New Bohemians
"The Wheel"

The others had already gone upstairs so Rafe and I headed that way ourselves. The hall was lined with cells that we found empty until we had almost reached the stairwell. There was a man sitting on the low cot that looked up at our approached.

It was George. Apparently he had been picked up while we were gone. I hoped I would get a chance to talk to him later but I didn't have time now.

"Brenda," he said, getting to his feet. He seemed much surer of himself now. The clumsy drunk that I had first seen in David's bar was gone and in his place was a man in of all things an Armani suit.

"George. Good they found you-" I stopped for a moment in front of the cell and Rafe stopped beside me, placing a hand on my waist.

"Brenda," he repeated.

"Look I can't talk right now. I have to find Elvira."

"I'm not George, Brenda. I'm Michael."

I dropped the hands full of fabric I had gathered from my dress and just looked at him. I'd had my suspicions all along that Michael was somehow trapped in George's body but to have it verified and know that he was in front of my right now was something totally different. My mind raced with unanswered questions. What had happened to him? Why is he in someone else's body? Why didn't he call me if he was in trouble?

"What are you talking about?" My tone was cool.

"Well it's good to see you under better circumstances." It was Michael's smile all right but it was on someone else's mouth. His eyes were on Rafe as he straightened a cuff link but he didn't say anything. It was very unsettling.

"I'm glad you're not in a bar acting weird again." I didn't know what else to say. Rafe's hand moved to curve around my waist in a possessive nature.

"Well I'm still weird but at least the suit fits." Good old Michael. He could deal with anything as long as he suit was well tailored.

I glanced to the control panel on wall and entered the code that opened the door. I didn't think it would be fair to go any further with bars between us. Rafe was still at my side and moved as if he meant to go in as well.

"I'll be right back, just stay here," I said as I kissed his cheek. I didn't give him a chance to respond; instead I entered and shut the door behind me. I was only a few feet into the small room and Michael immediately came forward. He tried to pull me to him but I stopped him with my hand. "Michael?" I wasn't sure what to say to him.

"It's me. I may not look the same but it's me."

I believed that it was indeed Michael but I studied him like I still wasn't convinced. Before I could stop myself, I slapped him hard across the face.

"What the hell was that for?" he raged with a hand to his cheek. He was just as shocked as I was. "Did you pump for that?"

I turn around a walk away from him. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm trying to get my body back." He was still holding his cheek. "And trying to see you."

"Oh, really. And what would spark that need after two years?"

"As if you have to ask."

"Well I must say I don't know what's going on with you. Maybe it's because I haven't *seen* you in a while."

"Brenda," Michael said, taking a step toward me again. "You know I love you."

There was no way in hell I was going to let him talk his way out of the way he has treated me. "Yeah, okay whatever."

"What did you expect me to do, stand around and watch your humanity fade as I've watched mine?" Michael fumed. "I wanted us both to be human, Brenda. I wanted us to have a normal life. It hurt me too much to watch you turn from the girl I loved into a monster that lived only for blood."

"It wasn't fair of you to expect me to wait for you forever," I replied evenly. "When you left you gave me the impression that you didn't care anymore, and now you've changed your mind and I'm suppose to just jump on your lap like a grateful puppy? Well I'm sorry, it's just not going to happen. Not now."

"It's not like I could have come to you in the past year. I tried. God knows I tried." Michael had his arms spread out at his sides to prove his point. It was so out of the ordinary to see gestures that belonged to him on another body.

"Oh, but you were able to break yourself away just enough to send roses every few months."

"I haven't sent anything to you in the past year, Brenda," he countered.

"Well, I have cards that say different." Just how long had this been going on?

"That's the other guy who has my body."

"So how did all that come about?" By now all thoughts of meeting Elvira upstairs had been put on the back burner.

Michael began to pace the cell. "It was a nightmare. I was minding my own business down in Mexico. All of a sudden all these Sabbat...listen, it's a long story the point is that I'm here now, Brenda." He had stopped in front of me and held out a hand in my direction. Part of me wanted to take it and let him pull me into his arms. To once again feel his strong embrace that I knew would protect me forever.

Reason won out, however. I blinked, remembering that Rafe was standing outside the cell, waiting for me so we could join the Prince. "Oh, and that's just suppose to make everything okay?" I asked harshly.

"Yes it is. We love each other. Isn't love supposed to make everything all right?" In his own way, Michael was pleading. I realized that what ever he'd been put through was probably bad and that he needed me just as much as I wanted to need him but things had changed. I couldn't let him turn my life upside down again.

"Michael, I'm sorry, I just don't believe you. It's been two years. Over two years, Michael. How much adjustment did you think I needed? When you left me, you took my heart with you and it's taken this long for me to get it back." I looked over my shoulder at Rafe and he gave me a supportive look in return.

My cell phone rang then and I half turned myself from Michael to answer it. "Hello?"

"Brenda." It sounded like Samantha.

"Samantha?"

"Brenda you have to help us." Things were crashing around her and I could hear hard voices yelling.

"What's going on?" I asked, trying to assess the situation.

"You have to help us," she repeated. "We're at Mother –" The phone went dead.

Something was going down at Mother Abigail's. It was a house for troubled teens that I knew Samantha and Rachel taught a class in Wicca at on Friday evenings. We had to get there and fast. I went to the door without another word to Michael and walked out of the room, making sure to lock it behind me.

"What are you doing?" I heard Michael ask.

Rafe could see that something was wrong. He took my hand and eyed me wearily. "People that I care about need help," I said looking into Rafe's eyes. "I have to go."

"We need to finish this conversation," Michael ground out.

I looked into the cell once again and met his gaze. "We'll finish it on my terms this time."

Rafe slipped his arm around my shoulders with a concerned look on his face. "Is there something wrong?" he asked.

"Something is happening at Mother Abigail's," I informed him as we went back down the hall to the room where we changed. I wanted to get my clothes since I had a feeling that a formal gown wasn't going to fit in the fight I felt was coming.

"Do you want your guns back?" Rafe asked as he shrugged off the formal jacket and grabbed the leather one I had worn earlier.

"No."

Chapter 41: Rallying the Troops

*"Baby it's all or nothing now
I don't want to run
And I can't walk out."
Cher
"All or Nothing"*

When we got up to the main floor of Guilty Pleasures Elvira was addressing the Kindred assembled there. "Wait a minute," she was saying. Her hands were raised over her head in an effort to quiet the crowd. "I know that there's been a lot of shit happening. I want everyone to listen to me. I understand that a lot of people have been hurt and that probably a lot more people will be hurt, but I want Roger Campbell, Akari and whoever is in Michael Moorecock's body brought to me alive. I don't care if you kill everyone else, in fact I prefer it, but I want those three alive. Bring me their ghouls in chains." As an after thought she added, "Oh, and bring me the teeth of that Brujah."

I found out from a passing clan member that it was the Sabbat that was at Mother Abigail's. Elvira had received a taunting phone call from Akari just before Rafe and I came upstairs and she was rallying every Kindred and ghoul that had been at Guilty Pleasures to go there.

Everyone left quickly. On the way out I saw Cormac with the Eliza, Stephen and three other werewolves from town pile into Micky's car. Rafe and I went got into one of the vans that had been brought around for transport and I changed back into my jeans on the way there.

When I was done Rafe faced me on the seat we shared and looked at me hard. "We're almost there," he said. I could tell he was worried about his sister and I mirrored his concerns. Samantha had to be all right. I didn't know what we would do if she didn't survive this night. "You have to take this and promise me you'll use it."

I looked down just as rays of streetlight moved through the interior of the van. In his hand Rafe was holding one of the Glocks I had made him take when we flipped back. Part of me wanted to take it from me but another remembered what I'd done less than an hour ago.

"Rafe," I began as the debate continued in my head, "I-I can't. What if-"

"No what ifs, Bren. This is the Sabbat we're talking about and they have Sam. We have to be ready for anything." His eyes implored me to take the gun.

"What if I hurt someone else?" I asked. "What if I shoot you?"

"It was an accident," he pressed. We had kept our voices down but the other riders in the van were beginning to look back at us. "You know what you have to do."

I looked at the weapon again and knew he was right. After a slight hesitation I took the gun from Rafe's hand, vowing that as soon as this mess was over I would hand it back to him again.

The convoy of mismatched vehicles stopped just down the street from the house and I was amazed to realize that almost every Kindred and ghoul in the city were here. Gavin, the Nosferatu leader, seemed to be in charge. He stood on the turned down tailgate of a truck as he told people which way to go into the large house and to wait for the signal before entering. He had a box of stakes for everyone to grab from.

Rafe and I were directed to enter through what we found out to be the living room of the house. As we approached I saw someone crouching in the shrubbery. To my surprise it was Birkoff and I quickly went to him.

When I there I realized he was crouching there because he was throwing up. I grabbed him by the upper arm and pulled him to his feet, making him look at me. "I can't believe he's doing this," he was mumbling stupidly. "He's never been like this before."

"Birkoff," I said looking into his eyes, prepared to Dominate him if I had to. "What's going on in there?"

"You have to see it to believe it." He was completely dazed and of no use to us at this point.

"Are you all right?"

"I'm going to be sick," he said dropping to his knees. Apparently there was nothing left in his stomach but he continued to retch anyway.

"Stay here," I told him. "Don't go anywhere." He nodded as he wiped the back of his hand across his mouth.

I looked into the window then and saw Michael holding a girl down on a couch by her upper arms. Most of her clothes had been ripped away and I could see bruises forming on her face and torso. He was poised to feed on her neck and the girl was screaming. Vivian stood nearby with blood on her lips and a satisfied look on her face. Another girl was on the floor with another member of the pack feeding her blood from an open wound in his arm. She tried to struggle but looked very battered and weak and wasn't doing a very good job of avoiding it.

In one corner of the room was a woman I recognized from around town with a young girl holding baby hiding behind her. The woman appeared to be fending off another pack member with her eyes that looked like she was struggling to get reach her.

I broke the window with the hilt of the Glock. There was no reaction from the others in the room. They were too busy with what they were doing. I climbed up onto the window ledge and entered the room.

Before I realized he was even there one of the pack members grabbed me from behind and wrapped his left arm around my neck. I used level-two Thaumaturgy to make him use his own blood in an attempt to throw him off kilter so I could escape his grasp. I lowered my fangs and prepared to attack if I had to.

The man in Michael's body had noticed me and was regarding me with exasperation. "Do you really think the elders will spare you because you've been their pawn all these years?" he asked. "You'll be among the first to fall. Join me, Brenda, before it's too late. We can still be together."

From another room I saw Cormac aim his gun and fire just as Stephen morphed into Crinos form. Stephen then entered the room and stepped up behind Michael who didn't notice the seven-foot werewolf.

The guy who had me from behind pointed a gun to my head. I was afraid Rafe would enter and try to do something that got him hurt so I turned my head and bit into his face to tear a chunk off it away. I wasn't able to escape him but I'd hurt him pretty bad.

"The embrace has changed you my love," Michael said from across the room. "If I could I would kill Antonio for it." There was hate in his eyes that I'd never seen before.

Stephen edged up behind Michael as he lowered his gun at me. Before anyone knew what was happening Stephen pushed Michael's head into the stone fireplace then moved on toward other people in the room.

With everyone's attention diverted I threw the guy half ass over my hip and he landed on a coffee table that broke. As I straightened I lowered my gun in his direction. The girl that Michael/George had pinned on the couch was hysterical now. She'd no doubt seen my fangs along with Michael's and all the other vampires in the room.

I aimed the gun at the pack member's head and pulled the trigger. It exploded, spattering blood everywhere especially on my clothing. Because of the close proximity, the phosphorus didn't have time to set fire to anything.

I turned from the guy's remains to see that Michael was pushing himself off the fireplace. He was shaking his head as if he was dazed but he still had the gun in his hand. From the corner of my eye I saw Vivian raise her own weapon at me and shoot.

I dodged away from the body of the member I killed and the round ricocheted off a wall. By now every mortal in the room was screaming their fool head off. That tends to happen when a Crinos Lupine is in the area. It has something to do with the fact of having everything you thought was fantasy thrown in your face as real. Some people never fully recover no matter how much they're Dominated.

Cormac had entered the room and pulled a revolver as he assessed the situation. From my position on the floor I turned to Michael and saw that he was coming up with a gun. It was pointed at me and I in turn aimed my Glock at him. Because of my familiarity with Michael it scared the shit out of me to stare down the barrel of his gun even though I knew it wasn't Michael.

Without warning the lighting in the room dimmed, like the lights were turned off but the room still had enough light to see in. Vivian was lying on her side on the floor, pointing her gun at me. I heard a shot being fired and the round hit a potted plant near her and it exploded into flames.

I figured shooter was Cormac. "I want her alive," I said as I pulled the trigger. The round hit the outside of Michael's thigh but it didn't ignite. As he fell on top of Vivian I quickly scrambled to my feet.

As I did so I saw that Rafe was still in the window, looking into the room. He had a gun pulled and aimed. By the expression on his face I figured he had been waiting for a clear shot that had been denied him. It pissed him off.

When I returned my gaze into the room I saw that Michael was attempting to get to his feet. The wound to his thigh wasn't that bad but it would slow him down enough to incapacitate him. He no longer had his gun and that was an added advantage as well. With a glance I saw that Vivian still had hers in her hand but she wasn't ready to fire at anyone yet.

I pulled a stake from the back of my waistband and approached Michael. "Drop the weapon," I told Vivian coldly.

"When you're dead bitch, he'll be mine," she hissed as she once again brought her gun to me.

"If it were him then I'd worry about it." She didn't get a chance to answer because she took a shot to her wrist causing the phosphorous rounds in her own weapon to ignite. Her entire hand was on fire now and she was screaming in agony. Some of the phosphorous had slashed onto Michael's face and arm and it bubbled a little as he stared at Vivian in shock.

I went to him and pumped blood into Strength. I'd never staked another vampire before but I knew it would be hard. I passed Cormac on the way. He had moved to the girl on couch and was trying to calm her down. He ended up Dominating her into sleeping and laid her comfortably back.

Michael was still staring and Vivian in shock from where he sat on the floor next to her. I hit him in the side of the head in an attempt to knock him out and he slumped to the floor. I

dropped to one knee and just as I raised the stake to plunge it into Michael's chest water appeared from out of nowhere over Vivian's head and distracted me. The water fell on her and extinguished the flames.

I saw Bruce enter the room from the corner of my eye. He was shirtless and seemed to notice two women in the corner. One was screaming inconsolably as she stared wide-eyed at Stephen's Crinos form and the other woman was trying to calm her down. When her efforts didn't get her anywhere she slapped the younger woman.

Bruce immediately understood the situation and went to the young Lupine. After a few low exchanges the priest switched back to mortal form and the room quieted. The young man was quite naked after his transformation and a blanket was taken from the back of the couch to wrap around him toga style.

I turned back to Michael and tried to stake him but failed miserably. The tip barely went into his skin but stopped like I didn't have enough strength. A cunning smile spread on his face as I stared at him in disbelief. I couldn't even do that right.

The lights returned to normal as Cormac came up and pulled a stake from behind his back. With ease he plunged it into Michael's chest then walked away. I stared at his lifeless body for a moment the rose as Rafe came up beside me.

"You okay?" he asked and I nodded mutely.

Vivian was dead. Even though it had been put out the phosphorus fire had killed her. Not the end I was hoping for for her but it would have to do.

Everything seemed to be under control in the rest of the house. So with Michael incapacitated my thoughts turned to Samantha. Where was she?

"What's going on?" The girl that Leroy had been feeding when Rafe and I had first approached the house was now awake and taking in the room for the first time. She'd been embraced and Bruce went to the hall and called for Elvira.

"Cannon fodder," I muttered as Rafe wrapped an arm around my waist. "Come on, let's find Sam."

As we neared the doorway I heard Cormac ask where Roger was and Bruce informed him that he was taking a chill in the kitchen. That was his way of saying that the other Lasombra was out of commission.

"What's going on?" Elvira asked from the doorway where Rafe and I were heading toward. I turned and saw Nina and Eliza standing close to the Prince. Micky was there, too.

"Have you seen Samantha?" I asked.

"No but I haven't been everywhere either," the Prince said as she assessed the room.

"Have you been upstairs?" Rafe asked respectively but with a touch of edginess.

"No. There are people up there, though."

Without another word Rafe and I left the living room and headed for the stairs. There were signs of carnage on the second floor but no sign of Samantha. We met Cormac, Bruce and Stephen on the way back down.

"They took some of the girls outside," Rachel informed us when she caught up. I was happy to see that she was okay but Samantha was still weighing heavy on my mind.

Bruce and Rachel accompanied Rafe and I out back to the garage but found its door locked. I was about to break down the door when it opened and revealed a frightened woman. Inside there were three others and they all appeared to have been beaten severely. One had been visibly bitten and the wound was still bleeding. Samantha wasn't among them.

With a quick look at the dirt floor and anyone could tell that it had been disturbed recently.

"Where in the fuck is Samantha?" I asked no one in particular. My patience was running out. If we didn't find her soon I was sure I'd blow.

One of the older women spoke up. "The guys that broke into the house killed several of the girls and buried them." She was pointing at the ground.

Rafe and I dropped the ground as one and started pushing handfuls of dirt aside. After the first few handfuls the dirt started moving out of the way by itself and the women left quickly. Six girls were buried in the shallow grave, and Samantha was one of them. As Rafe carefully pulled her lifeless body from the ground I saw puncture marks on her neck and my heart fell. We were too late. Samantha was either dead or Kindred. I wasn't sure how Rafe would react if she'd been embraced against her will.

Bruce came over and checked the other girl's pulses. When he was finished he turned to me slowly and shook his head sadly. They all appeared to be dead but we already knew about the possibility of Cannon Fodder and decided I that time would tell.

Samantha hadn't moved and Rafe began to slap her hard on the face, which brought out a little twitch. "Come on," he pressed. "Enough of this game, Samantha. It's time to wake up." She moved again slightly but didn't open her eyes. I got the feeling that she wasn't dead so I checked her aura. She was human and alive with myriad sparkles that signified she was using magic. Was our girl a Mage and we didn't know it?

"Samantha, come on," I urged as well. "You're safe now and everything is over. Wake up." She roused further and eventually opened her eyes.

The other girls were stirring now as well. With a glance I knew they had indeed been embraced and appeared to be hungry. Bruce went to the door and called out for someone to come and take the girls away. Zane appeared in the doorway a moment later with blood bags so they could feed. "Why are they feeding them blood?" Rachel asked.

"Because the people that hurt them made them what they are," Bruce explained.

"Great," she replied with a touch of sadness. "Shouldn't we be staking them?" I was appalled by her display of knowledge about what to do to destroy one of my kind. Apparently Bruce had been divulging information to her that he shouldn't have. I would have to deal with it later. Rachel could always be Dominated into forgetting what she knew.

"Like everything in life there is good and evil. Just because some of them have been turned doesn't mean they are evil. Just different," Bruce explained, reminding me once again how glad I was for his tolerance in situations like these. Rachel merely nodded in agreement.

Before he left again Zane let Bruce and I know that Elvira wanted to meet with everyone in the family room of the house. I told Rafe to stay with Samantha, that I would be back and he nodded in agreement.

We found that everyone who was still at Mother Abigail's had already gathered inside. Cormac and Eliza were there off to one side as well as Micky and Sarah. Michael/George was still on the floor in front of the fireplace and Akari and Roger had been brought in too.

Akari was missing both his legs and had wound on his elbow. Whoever had taken him down had done it without much leniency. Roger had a rather nasty gunshot wound in his gut. All three were staked.

Michael was there too in George Allen's borrowed body. I was happy to see Ford stand at Elvira's side once again. I also saw Malachi, Alden and Zora among the crowd.

Elvira had Roger brought forward so that he lay on the floor in front of her. Then she turned to Bruce and said, "You have the right to decide his fate. You can kill him or we can keep him and question him. It's up to you."

He was shocked. It wasn't in Bruce's nature to kill anything unless someone was in danger. It was true that Roger had tried to blackmail Bruce into joining the pack by

threatening Rachel's life, in fact I would find out later Roger attacked her at Mother Abigail's, but revenge wasn't in Bruce's vocabulary. Call it his eleventh century chivalry kicking in. He considered for a moment before responding in a low voice, "It is not for me to judge, My Queen."

"Very well," Elvira replied. "We'll hold him for questioning then." With a slight nod to waiting house ghouls the motionless body was taken away. "Whose has the teeth?" she asked then.

Nina worked her way through the crowd and offered the canines to the Prince. She took them and asked, "Who killed Noah?"

"Bruce initially," Nina replied. "I pulled them out after."

Elvira handed the teeth to Malachi and said harshly, "You need to take better care of your people or there won't be any of them in my city." He nodded cockily as he took them and turned to leave the room.

Then she called for Michael to be brought forth and looked to me. "I know how important it is to deal personally with someone who has hurt someone you love. It's your right to decide this man's fate, Brenda. I give you three choices. You can kill him yourself, you can let Michael kill him, or he can join the Lasombra for questioning. No one will interfere with your judgment but either way I'm afraid Michael will be trapped in George's body." Silence fell over the room.

"How come you can't switch them back?" Bruce asked.

"Do you know how?" she retorted.

This couldn't happen. No matter what had happened between Michael and myself I owed him this much. "No one knows the ritual?" I asked. There had to be someone out there who knew how to change them back and I didn't care if I spent the rest of my life looking for the answers. "Akari is still alive, can't you ask him?"

"I suppose we could." Elvira looked doubtfully at the body of her unscrupulous child. "Are you suggesting that we unstake the-"

"I'm suggesting that we try to find out." The thought of leaving Michael in his present state this was more than I was willing to let happen.

"There may be a ritual," Cormac spoke up from the corner. "It will take some study." I was touched by Cormac's offer. After all the snide comments we had shared over the last day or two I was surprised that he would even be interested in rectifying something that seemed so important to me.

"Akari was the Tremere of their pack," I reasoned. "It was most likely him who performed it. Can't we try?"

Micky moved forward and knelt beside the body. With Elvira's approval he pulled the stake from Akari's body and forced a few pints of blood down his throat to revive him. When he started to come around I went to him and put my foot on his throat.

"What did you do to switch the bodies," I ground out. My foot wasn't applying enough pressure to stop him from speaking but the intent was there.

It was several seconds before he responded. "It's a ritual," he replied, hoarsely as he looked around the room.

"How's it done?"

Akari was beginning to understand that the knowledge of the ritual was the only trump card he had left. "Very carefully," he said with a slight smile. He wasn't a threat in anyway. Micky had given him only enough blood to speak and Akari couldn't stand much less move around.

I applied pressure. "I want the details."

"What, do you want me to do it for you?"

"I want the details," I repeated.

He sighed, the light going out of his eyes again. Akari knew he was beat and probably figured the only way to make his final death any less painful was to come clean. "Something like this..." he began and started to chant in Latin.

I looked to Elvira to see if she wanted him stopped. She was only watching the events so I let him continue. Micky was still crouched next to Akari, ready to stake him again if need be.

Michael's body began to twitch on the ground while Michael in George's body was still standing by a wall. As the chanting continued, Michael started to sway and eventually lost consciousness and slid down the wall to lay in a heap. Akari stopped chanting and fell silent. I removed my foot.

"Brenda?" Bruce asked from behind me.

"What?" I glanced at him over my shoulder.

"Just checking," he replied with a quick smile that I returned.

I bent over Michael's body and after glancing to Elvira for permission, removed the stake.

He inhaled deeply as he blinked and looked around. "Jesus. What was that? Did you stake me?" His memories seemed foggy and my foot immediately went to his throat in case Akari had tried something stupid. Michael smiled devilishly as he looked up at me, "Well, if I'd known you wanted to get physical we could have gone someplace private." He started to bring his hand up to cup my calf and I quickly removed my foot, holding a hand out to him instead. He took it and I helped to his feet.

"What the hell did he do to my body?" Michael asked in disgust as he straitened the lapels of the jacket. "This isn't even an Armani." It didn't really matter. The suit was trashed and I knew Michael would be back in proper attire as quickly as possible.

I didn't want to admit it but I was glad to see him back where he belonged. I almost reached out to brush away an imaginary piece of lint but stopped myself and backed up a few steps to put some distance between us.

He was looking at me in that way he had that always sent my stomach fluttering. Blood bags were produced and Michael drank in order to fill up but his eyes never left me. Once I was sure he was okay I retreated to stand next to Bruce while Michael faced Elvira. She told him that he would be escorted back to the Chantry where he would stay until it could be determined just how much involvement he did or didn't have with the pack.

"I understand," he replied respectfully. As he was lead from the room his eyes fell on me again. *I hope to see you soon*, he thought to me but I didn't respond.

Elvira turned her attention once again to Akari and motioned for Micky to help him to a sitting position. The two studied each other in a way that said they were speaking telepathically.

"I embraced you against the will of my sire," she finally said aloud. "I would have done anything you asked me too. You had only to ask and I would have left Charleston with you. Your mistake was in trying to kill my sire. Now you leave me no choice but to execute quick Camarilla justice on you." Akari's eyes closed as he accepted his fate and Elvira looked around as if she were looking for something in particular. Cormac seemed to understand and pulled a long knife from his boot and handed it to her.

She took it with a sad smile and before using it, leaned down and kissed Akari's cheek. Without another word she neatly removed Akari's head and Ford looked on approvingly. After

she handed the knife back to Cormac Elvira turned to her sire asked if he would return to the Chantry for a nightcap. He nodded his head in agreement and we are dismissed.

I left the house in search of Rafe and Samantha and found them still in the shed.

Chapter 42: Paying the Piper

*"I wish you'd say what was on your mind
It maybe cruel but I don't mind"*

The Mavericks

"All I Get"

Rachel and Samantha were ready to go home. They have been Dominated and it seemed to have worked. Bruce was taking Rachel home himself so Rafe and I borrowed a car and left to take Samantha to her house next door. Her house wasn't far and on the way Samantha detailed her new memories as I drove. The girls had been told Mother Abigail's had been the subject of a home invasion and the girls that were embraced were killed. Samantha had escaped death herself by pretending to be dead.

"You scared me to death," Rafe said again as he regarded his sister who was sitting in the back seat. "You used to pull that shit when we were kids. I can't believe you did it again but I'm glad you did." I found Rafe's comment odd but tucked it away to ask him about it later.

Jorell was waiting at the door when we got there and I picked him up so I could take a look around. Everything seemed okay and Rafe asked if it was all right if he stayed with Samantha for a while, he didn't want her to be alone and I didn't blame him. He walked me to the door as Samantha went to her room to change for bed. "I'll be back before sunup," he said lowly as he clasped my upper arms. "I just want to make sure she gets to sleep."

"That's fine. Do you want me to have a car sent back?"

"No. I think she'll let me use hers." He glanced toward the stairs then leaned down to kiss my cheek.

"I would stay with you but I really need to check on Chris and talk to Elvira." I reached up to brush back a piece of his hair. Rafe smiled and turned his head to kiss my palm.

"Okay. I'll get back there as soon as I can."

"Okay." Remembering my silent vow I pulled my Glock once again from its holster and handed it to Rafe.

"No," he said with a frown as his hold on my arms tightened. "You may need that. Christina is in no shape to defend herself at this point and if something else happens you'll be needed to help." I started to protest but he pulled me closer to him. "I will not allow you to drive back to the Chantry alone without a means to defend yourself," he said through tight teeth that left me blinking up at him in surprise.

"I'll keep the PPK," I replied just as heated when I collected myself and he relented, taking the smaller gun from his jacket pocket and switching them with me. Rafe quickly stuffed the Glock in the back of his waistband then wrapped his hand around the back of my neck.

He appeared to be worried about something else but didn't voice anything. I figured it was about Samantha so I didn't say anything. She was safe now and she would stay that way if I could help it. I started to pull away to leave but Rafe brought me back against his chest and locked his mouth over mine.

The kiss was intense and silently told me how much Rafe loved and cared about me. I returned the kiss with the same passion and felt his arms wrap around me. Rafe was just pulling his head back when we heard Samantha clearing her throat at the door of the study. We both looked at her. She had changed into a tank top and shorts and had pulled her hair back into a ponytail.

"I was just leaving," I said my voice full of guilt.

She smiled and started toward us. "Okay. See you later, Brenda."

"Bye," I said with a final kiss on Rafe's cheek.

"Be careful," he told me as I walked out the front door.

I left and went back to the Chantry. Most of the clan members were already back there as well. I found out that Gavin and the other Primogen had assembled with Elvira and Ford in her study. I left word that if she needed me I would be around for the rest of the evening. I headed upstairs to check on Christina before going to my suite to shower. On the way I did what I could to build up my courage to face her.

I knocked on the door hesitantly and Jason answered. Christina was lying on the bed in men's pajamas, not looking to well. She had been cleaned up but still looked really pale, even for a vampire. I stepped just inside the door and proceeded to thoroughly inspect the carpet in guilt. She probably didn't want to ever see me again.

"Brenda," Christina said weakly. She held out her hand to me and I reluctantly approached the bed, my arms crossed defensively in front of me. I was ready for her to tell me she hated me.

"How are you feeling?" I asked quietly.

"Better," she replied, her hand still held out to me. I reached behind me and pulled the PPK out went to place it in her hand.

"I don't want your gun," Christina said, pulling her hand back. "I want your hand."

"I'm so sorry," I said putting the gun on the bed beside her.

"Jason, can you give us a minute please?" she asked the love of her life and he moved forward to briefly place a light kiss to her cheek before leaving the room.

Christina studied me carefully but I couldn't meet her eyes. After a minute of silence I lifted my eyes to hers and saw that she had a you're-being-stupid-and-you-know-it expression on her face. "Brenda," she said lowly and I turned away again. "You're being stupid and you know it."

"What are you talking about?"

"Just because there was an accident doesn't mean you should give up your weapons."

Well it sure as hell doesn't mean I deserve an award, I wanted to yell. "I should have been there."

"Been where?"

"Where you were. It should have been me."

Her brow furrowed. "Well, it was impossible for the both of us to be there."

"You shouldn't have been there." I felt the tears beginning to well in my eyes.

"But I was." The way she said it didn't place any blame but I knew it was all mine.

"I'm so sorry."

"Brenda, it was an accident." Christina's tone was so even. I didn't think I could sit here and listen to her act so calm. "It's not like you did it on purpose. Did you?"

How could she even think that? "No, I was stupid and it won't happen again."

"God I hope not." Christina chuckled a little. "I will never stand by the elevator like that again."

"No. Next time it will be me."

"Next time nobody will be there. But the point is that accidents happen. That's no reason for you to lay down your guns. Do you think other people don't have them?"

"I don't have accidents." Why didn't she understand how I felt? Wasn't Christina the one who blamed herself for Jason's embrace and wouldn't let anyone talk her out of it?

"Well you did," she said with another slight laugh.

"I don't want any more."

"Well then don't send me to stand on the other side of the elevator again." The laugh was still there.

"I just wanted to make sure that you were okay." I had to get out of here before I totally broke down in front of her.

"Brenda, come here."

"I really need to –" I choked.

"Brenda, come here and sit on the bed."

"I'm not going to sit on the bed. I'm covered in blood and I need to go change."

"Come here and sit down," she said impatiently as she picked up the PPK I had laid down beside her. I sat.

"Would it make you feel better if I shot you?" Christina asked after I'd settled myself. "It wouldn't be an accident."

That wasn't a bad idea. "If it made you feel better," I replied.

"It wouldn't make me feel better because I don't feel badly about this. I know that accidents happen. We can't be perfect all the time. I know that. If I were perfect than Jason would never have been embraced." Tears started to form in her eyes.

"Don't blame that on yourself." Why couldn't she just get over it? Thoughts like that did nothing but messed with her emotions and anyway it didn't matter now. They were together. All's well that ends well.

"Why not? Isn't it my fault?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"You weren't the one that drained him and feed him your vitae," I tried to reason. "Someone else did. You weren't the one that pulled the trigger –"

"I wasn't there to pull the trigger."

"You did what you could."

"And so did you."

"Oh, yeah. I could miss. And I could shoot you."

"I missed. And I didn't get there in time to save Jason and he was embraced and for two years he couldn't even look at me. Okay, couldn't show me he looked at me." She sounded disgusted as she reached out to take my hand and made me look at her. "If I had died I could see you feeling this way, but I'm not dead. I'm here and I'm going to be okay, just give me a couple of days and then we'll go to the shooting range and teach each other how to shoot better.

I smiled slightly feeling a little better about the situation. "I pray that Antonio never learns of my stupidity," I breathed.

"I think you had better find other things to pray about," she replied dryly with a knowing look on her face that meant the cat was already out of the bag.

"Great." I rose from the bed and walked to the wall.

"I guess that I should mention that Antonio is coming here."

"What?"

"Not because of you," she assured me. "He just thought it best to come visit us." She seemed awfully proud of herself about something.

"Oh, wonderful," I groaned mournfully. "I get to be chastised in person." I straightened Christina's things that had been arranged on one of the built in shelves as I worried about what I was going to say to my sire.

"Actually I think it was his intention to chastise you if you decided to put your guns away."

"He can't make me not put them down," I replied stubbornly. I turned my back to her so she couldn't see the obvious distress on my face.

"He can't?" Christina prompted mockingly. "We are talking about Antonio? Our sire, who knows Dominate much better than you or I?"

"He can't Dominate me."

"Well, if he can't there are others who can. Let's see Elvira –"

"You leave them out of this," I whirled back to face her. "Elvira doesn't know yet and I don't think she needs to." God what would I say to Elvira? I would lose my place on her security detail. I hated to admit it but my sister was starting to make sense.

"She doesn't need to know if you don't put your guns up," Christina was saying.

"Look this isn't the time to discuss this." I needed time to think.

"It is the time to discuss this. If you fall off the horse you need to get right back on," Christina pointed out. "I think you fell. It was a mistake and they happen. Get back on the horse Brenda."

I needed an excuse to get out of here and quick. "I really have to take a shower," I grasped.

"Take the gun back," she countered. I walked to the bed and slowly retrieved the holster she'd dropped on the coverlet and knew in the back of my mind that she was right. I just wasn't going to let her know yet. I held out my hand and she considered me before saying, "You will wear it and not put it in a drawer?"

"Oh, yeah sure."

She eyes me wearily. "Swear to me."

"I will do what needs to be done."

"That's not what I asked." Apparently I didn't look convincingly enough because she went on. "I guess I'll just have to call down to the study. I believe Elvira is down there. Or Micky maybe? Maybe he's the person I need to talk to." I snatched the gun from her and put it in its holster and slipped them both in my pocket.

"You should be resting," I threw over my shoulder as I went to the door.

"Swear to me, Brenda."

"Okay," I relented.

She wouldn't be put off. "You have to say it."

"Okay, I'll wear it."

"Loaded."

"Fine." My hand was on the knob and starting to turn it.

"Say it."

"Loaded."

"Thank you. Good night." I wrenched open the door and as I walked out she said, "Maybe you could knock on the other door and let Jason know you're leaving." I slammed the door and heard her say as she laughed, "That should do it."

Chapter 43: Aftermath

*"So I'll come by and see you again
I'll be such a very good friend"
Melina Etheridge
"Angels Would Fall"*

I returned to my room, showered and then dressed in a black tank top and a pair of white jeans. A glance at the clock told me it was almost nine-thirty and I figured now was the best time to go visit Michael before Rafe returned from his sister's. Before leaving the suite I carefully remove the pictures of Anna and Brenna from the pocket of my ruined khakis and tucked them away in the pants I now wore.

I knew I had to clear the visit with Elvira first so I when I got to the first floor of the Chantry I asked around and found out that she was in her sitting room. The rest of the Primogen had already left and she was enjoying 'cocktails' there with Alden, Ford, Gavin and Angel. I quietly opened the door and stood just inside, waiting to be noticed.

Elvira noticed me right away. "Brenda, it is good to see you. Come in." I smiled slightly as I went forward to kiss Elvira's cheek. "It was a good evening," she said proudly as she raised her glass and the others followed suit. "Many things were settled."

"Yes," I replied as I took a few steps back and gave Angel a quick smile that he returned.

"It is unfortunate about the girls but they will be dealt with." Ford and Gavin nodded in agreement.

"What will happen?" I asked. It was hard to stomach that so many innocents had paid the price for the Sabbath invasion and now had to be counted among our number.

"I'm not quite sure yet."

"Do you know what they are?"

"There's quite a variety," Alden replied as he adjusted in his chair.

"How many are we looking at?" I asked him.

"Seven."

"Will they be allowed to stay in the city?"

"No," he replied quickly then thought a second. "It's possibly that the one might, she's Brujah."

"Have you had a chance to speak with Michael yet?" I was trying to segue into the topic I really wanted to discuss.

"Yes I did, actually," Elvira said before taking a sip from her glass then licked her lips.

"And how did that go?"

She smiled. "What do you mean? He was quite cooperative although he is upset about being my guest in the dungeon."

I didn't want to press the Prince too much but I had to know. "How long will that be for?"

Her eyes flashed as she studied me. She understood my attachment to Michael but I knew she wouldn't tolerate me pushing her. "As long as I want," she replied stiffly.

I swallowed involuntarily. "Would it be all right if I went down there?"

Elvira was satisfied that I had been put in my place and relaxed again. "I don't see why not. I'm basically waiting. I heard Antonio is coming?"

"Yes. My sister informed me."

"And how is Christina?" she asked pointedly. I figured she'd already been let told about what happened to Christina.

"Um. She is fine. She is recuperating."

"I understand it will be a few days."

"Yes." My eyes were on the floor again.

"Accidents happen," she replied dismissively. "She'll be fine and that's all that matters. I understand she's had a chance to speak to Jason."

"I haven't talked to her about it. I just checked in on her and showered. I was a little messy."

"I believe that most of us were." But I remembered that she wasn't.

"Well then, by your leave I will go and speak with him."

"Of course. Just keep in mind that he is to be kept in the cell."

"Is it all right if I enter?"

"Yes. Don't go in armed," she warned.

"I won't."

I headed downstairs to the dungeon where I handed my PPK to the waiting ghoul. "I'm here to see Mr. Moorecock."

"He is in the corner cell there," the ghoul said and I started down the corridor.

I looked through the one-way mirror in the door to Michael's cell and found that he was staring at it expectantly. It must have been the bond of love we shared that told him I was so near. I laid my hand on the palm indicator and heard the door unlock then turned the knob and entered. I shut the door behind me and once again put my hand on the indicator to lock the door.

Michael was right behind me when I turned around. I tried to put distance between us but my back was already pressed to the door and Michael seemed a bit shocked at my reaction.

He stepped forward, closing what little distance there was between us, as if he were going to take me into his arms. I managed to raise my hands, palms to him, and said, "Please. Please don't do that."

"Don't do what?" he asked, trying to take my hand but I edged around him to walk further into the room. "Don't touch you?"

"Yes," I breathed with my back to him still.

"Why?"

"Things have changed, Michael."

"Yeah I'm back and things are the way they're supposed to be."

I couldn't believe that he thought it was that simple. "You can't expect to just step back into your role again without there being some consequences."

"I can't step back into my life?"

"You can step back into your life you just can't step back into mine."

"This is exactly what I expected."

"What did you expect?" I could feel Michael behind me and the need to go to him was strong.

"Well, I didn't expect such coldness from you," he said in surprise. "That's not the relationship we had."

I turned to him then. Michael was acting like this was our first discussion since his return. "Do you retain any of the memories of the conversation we had at Guilty Pleasures?"

"Yes."

"Just checking."

"Brenda. I know that I was gone and it took me some time to get used to the idea of you being Kindred, but once I got used to the thought it was too late. The Sabbath pack had me and there was nothing I could do for a year."

"You were gone for two," I pointed out. I knew he wasn't lying but it was hard to change the way I'd looked at Michael's desertion. Even though he'd been used by the Sabbath it didn't make up for the time he was willingly gone from my life.

"Did you expect me to get over it in a day or two?" Both of our voices were growing louder now.

"Did you expect me to just wait?" I countered.

"Yes," he replied simply. "We love each other, Brenda."

"Do you have any idea what it's been like for me since you left? I didn't know where you were, if you were dead or alive. Oh sure, I got your roses every few months. After I had made up my mind to move on. But what did they mean other than they represented you love, beautiful and sweet while they lasted, but they died after a while."

"My love for you has never died, Brenda," he said as he took a tentative step closer. "And I would have come to you if I'd had the chance to. As a matter of fact I did. Don't you remember seeing me in t-that body at the bar?"

"Yeah," I said holding my ground. "I remember. But I didn't know it was you."

He turned his head away from me and closed his eyes as if I'd struck him. I understood how hard it was for Michael to realize he'd lost but he always held out for a back door. "But it was. I came to you at the first chance I could. I knew you were there, Brenda. I could feel you."

"There was something about you too but I couldn't tell what." It was difficult for me to admit that. This was the man I'd first given my heart to and there were feelings for him that I'll never share with anyone else, including Rafe. That didn't mean I was willing to give Michael the opportunity to trample my heart again, though.

He took a step toward me and I fell back. "Things have changed, Michael. I can't...I can't do this."

Michael stopped and regarded me quizzically. "What are you saying? That you don't love me?"

"I will always care for you," was all I was willing to admit.

His eyes narrowed before saying, "That's an evasion. Either you love me or you don't Brenda. I know I still love you. And I believe you still love me."

"Things are different," I reasoned as I took a few steps away and crossed my arms over my chest. "You will always have a special place in my life but...I can't-I just can't do this." Tears started to fill my eyes.

"Can't do it or won't?" The hardness of his voice was back.

"I've made commitments that I'm not about to break."

Now Michael crossed his arms over his own chest. "So your puppy means more to you than I do?"

"That's not fair," I replied coldly.

"Brenda, this whole thing isn't fair," Michael pointed out.

"Yes. But it's your design isn't it?"

He ran a hand roughly through his hair. "I told you I tried to get back to you. And I did as soon as I could."

"You didn't have to leave in the first place." Unfortunately I knew Michael didn't understand my doubts and we'd reached an impasse.

"I tired to explain to you Brenda, what it meant to me to see you become Kindred." Michael was visibly upset now. "How much it hurt me to see you like that and to know that your humanity was gone. Just like mine is."

"But it's not," I replied with a hopeful look on my face. "There is good that we can do."

"Don't be naïve," Michael scoffed in disbelief. "We're monsters. Beasts. We feed from life."

"But we don't take it," I said almost desperately. "We don't have to take it like the Sabbat." Why didn't he see that? I looked at being a vampire as having a precious gift. I was able to do things now that I'd never been able to do as a human. I could save people from evil and help others find their potential in life. Michael had seen the dark side that lurked out there. I thought that maybe he could see these things easier than I could.

Michael was studying me speculatively. "Tell me you've never taken pleasure in killing."

"I haven't," I said with certainty, knowing that if I ever did it was the time to end my existence. "There are certain things that have to be done."

"And you don't get a certain satisfaction when those things need to be done?" he pressed.

"Like all life on this planet it is survival of the fittest. If you're domain is threatened, like the wolf, you have to protect what is yours," I said thinking of the Michael I'd met in the other world. And with thoughts of that man came thoughts of the children he and his Brenda had created together. "And I have found a new hope that gives me reason to end the atrocities of this world even though it will have no affect on them."

Michael's brow creased in confusion. "What, has this guy given you new hope?"

"Him partially but I have met some extraordinary people in the last forty-eight hours that give me hope to cling to." My hand moved to cover the pocket where I'd put the pictures of Anna and Brenna.

"Maybe you could share with me and we can both have hope," he said mockingly.

"I don't know if you would look at it the same way I do." I pulled the pictures of the girls from my pocket and he regarded me strangely. I handed him the more recent photograph that showed both of them together.

Michael took it and looked at it before asking, "Who is this?"

"Do you have any idea what your friends did to us?"

His eyes returned to mine with a look of disgust. "They weren't my friends."

"Do you know what they did to us?" I asked again.

Those blue orbs never left mine and it turned my stomach in knots. "I have no idea," he replied.

"We were switched with ourselves from an alternate reality, dimension, whatever you want to call it. I was traded with the Brenda of that world. Bruce was switched. Christina was switched."

"Christina's here?" he asked in surprise.

"Yes. She's here."

"I knew Jason was here." Michael shook his head as he chuckled slightly. "He's still the same cocky son-of-a-bitch he always was." His gaze once again fell to the picture in his hand.

"While we were there I met the you from that world."

"Really?" He glanced from the picture to me, waiting for a further explanation.

"Those are his children."

"He has children?" he asked in a small voice. "Then he's not..."

"No." I said as I began to walk around the room. "He's a werewolf," I said with an ironic laugh.

Michael went to the cot and sat down. "He's a werewolf and he has children," he said more to himself than me. "Are they werewolves, too?"

"Things work differently there," I explained. "He was bitten. He is a college professor and he was bitten one evening on campus and I guess that's how it happened."

Michael looked at me and said sorrowfully, "Things aren't too different then. He was bit and made a beast much like I was. Are they from before or after he became a beast?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "I really don't know." The conversation was beginning to feel weird. Here we were talking about things like nothing was ever wrong between us.

"So. Dare I ask who the mother is?" The look he gave me told me he already had a guess.

I smile slightly and said, "Let's just say that he was anxious to get her back."

"He didn't marry Christina did he?" Michael teased with a boyish grin.

"No." I laughed out loud and he joined me.

"That would leave you," he said and I nodded slightly. "We were married and had children," Michael continued as he studied the picture and for once he was stunned.

I walked around the room some more needing to move. "She is a hunter in that world," I told him but he wasn't listening.

When Michael finally looked at me again his eyes were full of amazement. Tears were in both our eyes. "And did she get back to him?"

I nodded. "As far as I know. I came back here so she must be back there."

"This just proves my point," Michael said as he stood again. "We were meant to be together. How can you deny that?"

"Michael," I began in a tired voice, "I don't want to hurt you but I just can't go back to that."

"Why not?"

"You would want me to live with the knowledge that at any time you could get it in your head that I needed time to adjust to something else and leave again?" God, he was so pigheaded at times.

"Have you adjusted to being Kindred?" he asked quietly. He was once again moving closer as if he were stalking me.

I held my ground. I couldn't let Michael know how much his presence still affected me. "I think I have."

"Then why would I get that in my head?" He stopped where he was.

"Any number of things could crop up. You've left once and you could leave again."

"I didn't leave," he pointed out. "I gave you some space."

"You left when I wanted you to be there the most."

"And now the tables have turned."

"Michael, I wanted to be with you-"

He cut me off. "I want to be with you now."

"-I wanted to be an equal partner," I continued. "And I understood that you didn't want to embrace me. I understand that now more than ever. I wanted you, Michael. Not what if's or could have been's. I will always be eternally grateful to Antonio for the gift he gave me."

"Well I can't say the same." He regarded me a moment before saying, "The embrace has changed you."

My chin went up defiantly. "I don't think it has."

"If you can deny what we feel for each other than you have changed."

I turned away from him. "You don't know how hard this is but I have to take into consideration what could happen. I can't just walk away from my life here to go away with you."

"So I'll come here."

"No." I shook my head with me back still turned to him. "It's beyond that now."

"Only if you make it that way." His voice held a trace of desperation.

"Things have changed." Regret filled my thoughts.

"Yes," Michael replied sarcastically. "You have Rafael."

I reeled to face Michael and pointed a finger in his direction. "My relationship with Rafe is none of your business. You gave up any right to question my actions when you left."

Michael's hands went up in fake surrender. "I wasn't questioning your actions just stating fact. Maybe I was wrong about your feelings for me."

I took the chance and crossed to Michael and put my hand on his cheek. "I will always care for you but it's just been too long."

Before I knew what was happening Michael pulled me into his arms and his mouth locked on mine. I was lost in the familiarity of Michael's lips as his tongue pushed past my lips and merged with my own. I reacted like someone drunk with lust as my tongue began to battle with his and my hands started to move up his chest.

Then Rafe's face popped in my mind and I pulled back quickly. "I-I'm sorry," I stuttered as my hand covered my mouth and I stepped away from him. "I-I can't let this happen."

"Why not?" Michael challenged as he took a step toward me then stopped. "Oh, let me guess, Rafael." I was beginning to hate the way he said Rafe's name.

I pulled the picture from Michael's hand and looked down at it. "I'm so sorry." I turned and went to the door. I placed my hand on the pad and allowed it to scan my print.

I didn't immediately open the door after the mechanism had finished. Without looking at Michael I said, "I'm sure Elvira doesn't intend on keeping you here forever. Once you're free to go I hope you stay in Salem if you choose. My sire will be here soon and I'm sure the two of you will have some catching up to do. I hope to go back to my house soon. Perhaps you could visit."

Michael didn't answer. I turned for one last glance and found that he was only regarding me intently. I opened the door as I slipped the photograph back in my pocket.

Michael's eyes moved past me and a cocky grin spread on his face. I turned back to the hallway and found that Rafe was standing there. I didn't know how long he'd been standing there or how much he'd overheard and dread filled my being.

Rafe didn't look happy. I smiled at him but he was looking over my shoulder at Michael with murder in his eyes. I hoped he didn't decide to enter the room and try to fight with Michael.

"Brenda," I heard from behind me and I turned. "When you get tired of the boy you know how to find a man."

My eyes narrowed on Michael before I spoke. I'd tried to be kind to him during this visit but he'd stepped too far. "Michael, I always knew you were one to get what you wanted but I never realized what an ass you could be." I didn't give him a chance to respond. I walked out and shut the door behind me then engaged the lock.

Chapter 44: Happily Ever After...

*"Did I disappoint you?
Or leave a bad taste in your mouth?"*
U2
"One"

Rafe had moved back enough to allow me out and stayed behind me as I relocked the door. I was terrified to think about what was going through his mind and exhaled before turning to face him. I checked Rafe's aura to see where I stood and the colors swirled fiercely. He was suspicious, angry, afraid and confused. But I found courage in the fact that love and desire rotated with the other emotions. Perhaps there was hope.

Rafe didn't say anything, just put his hand protectively on the small of my back and gestured toward the stairs where we stopped to retrieve my gun.

I knew the encounter was going to be a doosey so we went directly to our suite on the second floor. We moved silently with Rafe's hand still at the small of my back, but it held no love as was customary. Once inside, I saw that Sarah's story was still on the table and I went to it and started fingering the stack of paper, not sure what to say. What had he seen?

Rafe began removing his guns as well as the ones I'd made him take earlier. He put his in the drawer of the bedside table and mine on top. He hung his jacket in the closet and the figure eight on its hook.

My mind was racing. By his reaction I was sure Rafe had seen Michael's kiss and I was terrified about what he was thinking. As far as I knew the subject of Rafe's jealousy over Michael was dealt with and buried but I also realized that seeing me and Michael locked in each other's arms could break down everything he and I had built.

Rafe was removing his shirt now and putting it in the hamper. Next his shoes that he placed on a rack in the bottom of the closet. He was doing everything he normally did when preparing for bed only this time there was the deadly silence. His socks and pants joined the shirt in the hamper before he went into the bathroom where he turned on the shower. He didn't look at me once.

I let him have his shower. I figured he was really pissed and that he needed time to calm down. I removed my own jacket then sat down at the table to wait and tried to figure out what to say. When Rafe stepped out of the shower he was clean shaven and had pulled a towel around his waist. I watched him moved to the sink and pull a comb through his hair.

He entered the bedroom again and put on a pair of flannel pajama bottoms and a white tank top. He put the towel back in the bathroom and when he came back he went to the bed and grabbed the remote and turned on the TV in the wall. Fifteen to twenty minutes had passed by then and my nerves were stretched to their limits. I'd never seen Rafe this defiant and I was worried.

I cleared my throat in an effort to get his attention. Rafe glanced over his shoulder at me briefly before returning his gaze to the screen. Not knowing what else to do I stood as Rafe pointed the remote at the screen and started to channel surf. I deliberately put the chair under the table and approached the bed. The closer I got the quicker the channels clicked by.

I moved to stand between Rafe and the television. Before he could say or do anything I took the remote from him and turned to shut the TV off. I was over the silent treatment and determined we were going to talk.

Rafe in turn rolled on the bed to lean against the headboard and grabbed a book that was on the table. He didn't realize that when he opened it the book was upside down. I did.

"So exactly how long were you down there and what did you see?" I asked finally. He didn't reply just pretended he read the upside down book. "Rafe," I prodded.

"Yeah." His eyes didn't leave the page.

"Put the book down." Rafe turned a page before he looked up at me. Then he put the still open book on the bedside table where it promptly fell to the floor. I fought the urge not to smile. I was standing with my hands on my hips much like a teacher about to chastise the class. "How long were you down there?" I repeated.

"You mean downstairs?" He sounded so flip. "Not very long."

"How long is not very long?"

"A few minutes."

"What did you see?"

He shrugged and said noncommittally, "The hallway. The cell. You and Michael."

"Is that all? It's not what you're acting like."

Rafe rolled off the bed and went to the French doors that led to the balcony. He opened the one on the right and stood there, looking out to the sea. I started to walk up behind Rafe and the closer I got to him the straighter he stood. When I was close enough I stopped and stood to his left.

"In all honesty, Michael kissed me and it took me by surprise," I whispered, looking out the open door like Rafe was. "I was shocked and it took me a minute to pull back but I did. And I would have told you if you weren't there." His left hand was on the other door and he was fingering the curtain there. I put my right hand on his waistband and stepped closer. I wasn't touching him in any other way but Rafe went deathly still. "Rafe. Do you believe me?"

"I don't have any reason not to," he replied evenly.

"So why aren't you looking at me?" my voice cracked a little.

Rafe glanced at me over his shoulder then turned and took a step back, breaking the small contact of my hand on his waist. He didn't meet my eyes. I dropped my hand and breathed out. He didn't believe me. I turned away and went into the bathroom with my arms crossed in front of me. I had no idea what to do now. I went to the sink and washed my hands very vigorously, needing to do something even that mundane.

I heard Rafe moving around in the bedroom and it sounded like he was in the closet. I quickly rinsed my hands, shut off the water and waited. He was definitely in the closet. It sounded like he was getting dressed.

I went and stood in the doorway to the bedroom. I couldn't see him because the closet was next to the bathroom so I went to stand by the closet door. Rafe had pulled on a pair of jeans and socks and had just picked up a gym shoe.

"Where are you going?" I asked, trying to hide my panic. I wanted to grab the shoe and hold it away from him.

"For a walk."

"Isn't it late?"

Rafe shrugged. "It's only ten."

"Why aren't you talking to me about this?" I felt tears in my eyes and blinked them away. They wouldn't help now.

"Didn't think you wanted to talk about it," he replied cryptically without looking at me.

"What makes you think I didn't want to talk about it?"

He glanced at me quickly before turning away again and pulling on the gym shoe.

"Because we've had this conversation and there's no reason to have it again."

"So what does that mean?" Panic was continuing to mount and I had to fight hard to suppress it.

"It means that we've had this argument, Brenda, and there's no way to resolve it."
Rafe bent over to retrieve the other shoe.

"So what do you think you're going to do?"

"I'm going to take a walk. Then I'm going to come back, get ready for bed and sleep."
Both shoes were on now but I didn't understand why he felt he had to go anywhere.

"I thought we had reached a decision about this discussion."

"We have," Rafe confirmed.

"What does that mean?"

"That we agreed not to have this conversation anymore," he said as he turned to look at me. There was a hard edge to his voice I'd never heard before. "That we were done with it."

"But obviously we're not."

"I don't have a problem with it." Yeah, right.

"You're not acting like it."

"What am I acting like?"

"You're acting like you did before." He reached to pull out a shirt and I moved into the closet as well and put my hand on his to stop him. Our faces were as close as they could get given the height difference. "Do you have any idea how hard all of this has been for me?" I asked.

"Maybe you should tell me," he ground out as if he didn't believe me. "What part has been hard for you?"

"I thought he was gone. I thought I wouldn't have to worry about him anymore and then he pops up again." I didn't let up an inch. "I thought I could go on with my life. Then I met someone that I care a lot about and want to build something lasting with and Michael shows up again out of the blue. We get flipped to an alternate reality where I find that not only are they married but also they have kids and their both human and everything is hunky dory. I worry about your every reaction to things and...and t-this isn't the easiest thing in the world for me to deal with." Tears were in my eyes again and I fought hard not to let them spill out. "He thinks he can just step back into the role that he had two years ago. And he can't."

Rafe was looking at our hands that were on his shirt then turned to me. "This has been hard for you?" he asked with a choke in his voice. "You want me to trust you and I'm trying so hard, Brenda. But when I see you kiss him what am I suppose to think? I know you told me you don't want to be with him. That you want to be with me. But what am I suppose to think when I see you in his arms like that?" The dam had finally broken but I wasn't sure if it was going to help.

"I told you what happened. Don't you believe me?" If Rafe's trust in me was gone then we were through. Thank God he said the only thing I wanted to hear.

"I believe you," he said quietly. "That doesn't make it hurt any less."

My temper got the better of me. I felt like Rafe was playing both sides like he was the only one with something to loose in this relationship. "Well you know what? At least all you have to worry about is Michael." Rafe blinked and looked at me in surprise but I continued. "Every time we go somewhere I have to worry about whether you're looking at every man that we come across and if you're missing something that you had before."

Rafe continued to look at me in confusion but I went ahead. "I worry when you talk to Jax...a-and, well, at least all you have to worry about is Michael." I turned and walked to the table where I grabbed a chair back to ground myself.

"What are you talking about?" he asked astonished. I hadn't meant to confess my insecurities about his interest in men. That had nothing to do with our relationship but it still lurked in the back of my mind.

The wood of the chair began to creak under my clenched hands. I was so mad I was shaking. I couldn't respond when he too stepped away from the closet and stared at me. "I have never given you cause to believe I have ever looked twice at anyone else," Rafe said. "Jesus, I haven't looked at anyone else."

I was fighting for control. It was really hard to let him see how vulnerable I was about this subject. "Do you really think that I need anything more than you?" he asked. "Do you think you're not enough for me?"

My head jerked up. "How am I supposed to know that?" I asked.

"I show you every day," Rafe replied with conviction. "Aren't you the one I come home with? The one I sleep with? The one I love?" His voice broke and he turned away.

"Yeah, the one who's going to walk out." It was so hard to be this vulnerable in front of him. I'd always tried to be the strong one so that I could protect Rafe.

"I was just going for a walk," Rafe replied astonished. The chair under my hands creaked again as blood tears filled my eyes. "Brenda, I would never leave you."

I couldn't hold back the tears anymore and broke down into gasping sobs. I tried to admonish myself for being so weak but I'd lost all control. I'd never cried so much in my entire life as I had in the past three weeks. Rafe had a way of stripping away all the barriers that I'd established since I was a child. He made me be just me, Brenda, and I didn't think I could handle being this much out of control. I sounded pitiful as sobs raked my body and I doubled over the back of the chair.

I felt Rafe's hand on my back and I heard the tears in his voice as he spoke. "Brenda I would never leave you. Even if I wanted to I couldn't. I don't want to."

"I need you so much," I choked out.

"Not half as much as I need you."

I straightened and his arms wrapped around me, pulling me to him so we touched from shoulders to knees. He buried his face in my hair as my arms covered his and we just held on to each other. I turned my head to his and our cheeks touched. We both babbled how much we loved and needed each other. "I'm afraid he'll take you away," Rafe said. "If anyone could it would be him and that's what scares me."

"Don't worry," I told him. "You're what I want. What I need."

"I saw you together and I just wanted to kill him. You made me promise not to try anything and I just - "

We stood there for a while longer, holding each other and continuing to let the other know how much we meant to each other. "I didn't mean for you to be hurt -"

"Shh," he said and turned me in his arms. He kissed me passionately then and molded our bodies together. My arms went up and around his neck as the merging of our lips and tongues continued the conversation of how much we loved each other.

Rafe eventually pulled his head back and licked the blood tears that lingered on my cheeks. I smiled at him as my fingers found their way into his hair and he pulled me to the bed.

"I love you," I said while Rafe's fingers pushed up under my shirt.

"And I love you," he replied and pulled the shirt up and over my head. "Let me show you how much."

I nodded and we quickly pulled each other's clothes off and threw them around the room. "I want to taste you," I panted as my fangs dropped and our mouths connected again.

Rafe groaned like an animal and together we knelt on the bed. I pierced first my tongue then his and we allowed our blood to mingle a little before drinking at the same time.

We melted down on the bed as one and gave ourselves over to the passion we shared. Our lovemaking was incredible. We both reached new heights in pleasure as well as how well we knew the other's bodies. When we were done and lay spent in each other's arms I came to realize how close I'd been to losing this incredible man. I wanted to make sure I never came that close again.

"How does a September wedding sound?" I asked as Rafe ran his fingers up and down my back. He had pulled me to his side after we'd finished and my arm was now draped over his chest.

His fingers stopped. "What are you saying?" he asked.

I lifted my head and looked down at the man who'd changed my life. "That I love you with all my heart and that I can't wait to be Mrs. Rafael Brown."

Rafe's face erupted with happiness as he pulled my head down and he kissed me thoroughly. "In that case," he said after our lips parted, "September isn't soon enough to make you mine, but I guess it will have to do."

"We already belong to each other," I told him as I lowered my head once again and knew my happiness was assured for now and forever.

*"These arms of mine are open wide
from now until the end of time"*

*Backstreet Boys
"Back To Your Heart"*

Epilogue

"The movie's over - fade to black"

Meatloaf

"Life is a Lemon and I Want My Money Back"

One year later

"If you don't hold still I'm going to stab your head," Christina scolded good-naturedly as she put in the remaining hairpins that would secure the jeweled headpiece in my hair.

"Sorry," I replied in a low voice as I studied my reflection in the vanity mirror. What I saw was an incredibly frightened version of myself and I was surprised when my fingers shook a little as I smoothed the white fabric of my skirt. "Are you sure this dress is okay?"

My sister chuckled as she tucked the last curl into place. "Well its a little too late now don't you think? Rafe's probably waiting for us by now."

My stomach fluttered a little when Christina said his name. In just a few minutes I would be Mrs. Rafael Brown and I couldn't stop the worries that once again ran through my mind. Were we doing the right thing? I loved Rafe with all my heart but marriage and a vampire didn't usually fit in the same sentence.

Christina seemed happy enough. Next month would mark the one-year anniversary of her and Jason's wedding and they'd adjusted fine; she'd even managed to keep Frasier around without too many fights between the two men.

"Hey, are you all right?" she asked me. We were alone for now in the upstairs room where the girls were all getting ready. Sarah had gone down to see to the final details and Samantha was checking on Rafe.

I looked around the room and smiled, thinking that Micky had bought this house because Rafe had wanted a beach wedding. The Wheadon Estate was a large beautiful house that had been for sale at the time. Now Micky and Sarah lived here instead of at the Jesters.

"Brenda," Christina laid her hand on my shoulder and our eyes met in the glass. "Are you okay?"

"Just nervous, I think," I laughed tensely but held her gaze. "I'm doing the right thing right?"

Her brow furrowed as she studied my features. "Of course you are. You love him don't you?"

"With all my heart," I confided. "I just needed to hear someone else say it."

"Is this about the package you received earlier?" she asked.

My eyes closed at the thought of the gift that Michael had sent. Like clockwork over the past year he'd reminded me he still wanted to be a part of my life. He'd sent potted red roses at Christmas and at Valentines Day, even one on my birthday. Rafe took it all in stride but tried to out do the simple yet perfect gestures of Michael's affection.

For the wedding Michael had sent a beautiful rose pin made from rubies, diamonds and emeralds. It wasn't gaudy or extravagant just in Michael's own way perfect. The note was simple as well:

My love will never die. When you are ready, I will find you.

M

Rafe didn't know about it yet and I wasn't going to tell him, either.

I stood and went to the overnight bag I'd brought with me and pulled out the small jeweler's box then handed it to my sister. She opened it and gaped. "Oh, gosh. This is beautiful. Where did you get it?" She studied me intently.

"Michael sent it."

"Ooooh." Christina didn't hide her look of shock. "This guy just doesn't give up, does he? Does Rafe know about this?"

"No, and I don't want him to know about it. Will you take it back to the house with you?"

Christina shrugged her shoulders. "Yeah, but what do you want me to do with it?"

"Just put it in one of the desk drawers in my study." The door opened then and Samantha walked in carrying her three-month-old son, Brendan Rafael McLean. Christina side stepped over to her own bag and safely tucked the box inside it before Samantha could see it.

My heart lifted at the sight of my soon to be nephew. Right after all the hoopla the Sabbath had caused died down some of Rafe's friends from New York had come to visit. One of them had been Alexander James a.k.a. AJ McLean, a very well known horror writer like Stephen King and Dean Koontz. He and Samantha had fallen in love and after a long hard road were now married themselves. Brendan was born in June and all three have lived happily ever after together. That, however, was another story.

"Hey, how's my favorite boy?" I asked as I went over to Samantha and tickled the baby under the chin.

"Dry for now," Samantha scoffed happily as she handed him over to me. "Thank God he didn't do a number while I was changing him." In an effort to make sure she was right, Samantha looked down and studied the corral bridesmaid dress to ensure she hadn't suffered any damage from changing her son. She was beautiful. Married life suited her perfectly.

"Everything okay downstairs?" I asked, remembering myself what damage babies could do not only to their own clothes but also to everyone else's. I'd had to trash many shirts after Brendan had been born but I didn't care. Now however, I was in my wedding dress and took great care while I played with him.

"Everyone is ready when you are," Samantha announced. "Antonio wanted me to tell you he would be up in a moment."

"That's fine," I said as Brendan shoved his fingers in his mouth. I pulled them out so I could kiss his cheek and asked Samantha, "Who's going to watch him during the ceremony?" AJ was one of Rafe's groomsmen along with his other friend Howie Dorough and his cousin Brian Littrell. Christina, Sarah and Samantha were my bridesmaids and that didn't leave many mortals to look after Brendan. Not that AJ or Samantha had an aversion to Kindred but most vampires weren't interested in babysitting.

"Corrine. She should be coming up to get him," Samantha replied as the door opened again and Sarah and Antonio walked into the room. Just before they closed the door behind them, Corrine Wright appeared as well.

I smiled at my sire and went over to kiss his cheek. "Are you ready, childe?" Antonio asked positioning himself so that Brendan couldn't reach him.

"Just about," I told him. "We were just waiting for Corrine to come for Brendan."

"I'm ready," she said as I gave my namesake one last kiss and handed him to the girl. I'd come to know Cormac and Eliza's daughter very well over the last few months. Ever since she'd begun dating Rafe's cousin, Brian.

"I'm glad you could be here," I told her and she flashed a radiant smile.

"Thank you, Brenda. I'm glad to be included." The young woman had dealt with a great deal in the past year along with all of us. Like Samantha, she was a newly Awakened

Mage but she'd also found out that the person she'd thought of as a good friend was actually her mother. Eliza had willingly entered into a contract with the Tremere Clan to protect her daughter and I had to commend her for that.

Now Eliza led a very different life. She'd been reunited with Corrine's father, Cormac Brennen and was his ghoul. I didn't think of her as badly as I did before.

As it turned out Cormac and Christina share the same sire and I found myself having to accept him into our family.

"Shall we begin?" Sarah asked and Christina passed out bouquets. Corrine quickly ducked out of the room with Brendan as Antonio link our arms together.

The beach had been set up with lit torches all around the perimeter of the area. White chairs made two rows on either side and small lanterns hung from hooks that made the aisle. Antonio's arm was strong under my hand as we exited the back of the house.

"Nervous, childe?" he asked as his other hand covered mine.

I smiled up at his dark brown eyes. "A little, but I'll be okay."

Cormac's nephew, Father Stephen Brennen, stood beneath a curved archway that had been decorated with green ivy and colorful flowers and a huge candelabrum had been erected behind him. The guests were standing so I couldn't see Rafe yet but I knew he stood not far from Stephen.

Thoughts of the conversation we had a few months ago came back to me about where Rafe and I were going to honeymoon. I'd been sure he would have wanted to go to Europe and see the sights. I was shocked when Rafe had suggested that we go to Las Vegas so he could meet my father. Dad was too sick to make the trip and I was sad but grateful at the same time. I wouldn't have been able to do anything with him during the day and he would have asked questions I couldn't answer.

My eyes scanned the group of people who'd assembled for this event and saw so many friends and family. I could see Rafe's Uncle Alec and Brian's parents in the front row on one side and Elvira, Micky and Idella on the other with an empty chair for Antonio. They still didn't understand Christina's and my need to marry the men we loved but they didn't try to talk us out of it either.

Nina Rodriguez had come from Los Angeles and sat next to Cormac with Eliza on his other side. Corrine sat next to her mother with Brendan on her lap.

Jason, Frasier and Bruce sat in a neat row with Rachel Black there to keep an eye on them so they didn't get into trouble. In fact all the members of the Black Rose Coven were in attendance. Word had spread throughout the ranks that Sarah was alive and well and old friendships were once again established to a certain degree.

I was trying to get a look at Rafe but Christina was in the way. Then there he was. The guys had decided to forego the usual tuxedos because of our choice of venue. Instead, they opted for baggy khakis and loose-fitting white silk button ups. At AJ's suggestion they had also decided not to wear shoes so I figured I'd do the same with for the girls and myself.

Rafe had let his hair grow longer in the past year but it was still short by other's standards. He was just as anxious to see me as I was to see him and our faces sprouted identical smiles simultaneously. In his eyes I saw the love and happiness that I knew lived in my heart for him.

All the doubts I had about marrying Rafe escaped my mind as Antonio led me down the aisle and knew that Rafe felt the same. I also knew that as a team we could overcome anything life decided to throw at us.

I wanted to run to him so we could start our life together as soon as possible.