



Be Careful What You Wish For

A Continuation of Brenda

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Chapter 1 - A Decision Is Made

*"I thought this place was an empire
But now I'm relaxed - I can't be sure."*

Matchbox 20

"If You're Gone"

I gripped the steering wheel of the roadster tightly as I drove through the tree-lined streets of Salem on my way home. Home. It had been hard lately for me to consider the huge house on Elm Street, home, in the recent weeks since my sister had disappeared, but it was getting somehow easier with each passing day.

I had just left the Chantry after a lengthy conversation with the Prince that had left me drained and in great need of some relaxation. Actually it wasn't really a conversation, it was me asking permission. Permission to make a new ghoul.

I knew that Rafe was against even the remotest possibility of me ghouling Howie and I had to admit that taking on the added responsibility was the last thing I wanted, either. But I had already been through every other plausible solution in my head a hundred times and this was the best outcome for everyone. The only outcome really, when you thought about it.

It was really hard for me to admit that I didn't feel safe anymore. Even the thought of the ghoul who had been in the house during those early days of the Sabbat attempted takeover hadn't made me feel as shaken as I was now. Ghouls I could deal with. Another vampire? No problem, I knew what I had to do to kill them. It was the fact that Changelings had gotten into my house and had taken my sister to parts unknown, right underneath my own nose to boot, that sometimes made me wake up in the middle of the day in a cold sweat even though I wasn't suppose to awaken at all.

The fact was that now I didn't feel safe in the one place that I should, my home. The place where I lived with my husband and until recently, my sister and her husband and ghoul as well. I didn't know if I would ever be able to shake the feeling that at any moment something would be in the next room to kill me, or to tempt me to go off somewhere for their own sick pleasure. I didn't know if I would ever again know what it was like to feel secure. That thought didn't set well in my stomach.

Malcolm Robbins had sent the Changelings for her. Sent them to my home to lure her away from those that she loved. Now she was living in Detroit, robbed of the memories of safety and harmony that she had once felt in our company. Now she didn't trust us like she once had, even Jason Kline, the man that she loved over anyone else in the world. Slowly we are attempting to reestablish our relationship so that it resembled, at least in part, something of what it once had while many members of the clan try to find something that will give her memories back to her. If these attempts fail, however, it will never make up for the years that Christina might never remember again. It's a hard road that we travel but it's what we have to do in order to have her in our lives once more.

Now I'm left wondering who is next to be harassed and tormented by this man that Christina had once called friend and mentor. Jason had been the first to fall. Malcolm had kidnapped him in Italy over three years ago and in the end, Jason had managed to walk away but that was only after being embraced into the Nosferatu clan where he could no longer use his incredible masquerade skills as he once had when he had been Talon Graves' ghoul.

Somehow, he claims by the grace of God, today Jason has been healed and the blood that courses through his veins has been somehow changed so that he is now Gangrel. I, myself cannot say how this happened, but if it makes Jason feel better about himself why would I care?

Lena Stockton was next. Stolen from her home in the middle of the night from the arms of the man she loved and taken to another dimension by a madman who had once taught my sister the ways of magic when she was still mortal. Thankfully, Christina and Jason had been able to bring Lena and her son back to their home, even though she was still weak from giving birth to him.

These were two of the closest people in Christina's life and it's hard for me to admit the fact that I am afraid that I might be next. Christina always blamed Malcolm's actions on herself, that he was trying to get to her through those that she was closest to. If that is the case then, unfortunately, I seemed like the next logical choice because of who I am and the time that we have spent together and that knowledge doesn't sit right in the pit of my stomach. I was worried not only for myself, but for my husband, Rafe, and everyone else around me.

That was why I had gone to see Elvira, so that I could ask permission to ghoulish Rafe's friend, Howie Dorough. Howie was in my home almost every day because of Prosperous Word, the business that he and Rafe had started in the basement of the house. If Malcolm decided that I was next on his hit list, Howie would be at a very big disadvantage because he had no supernatural gifts to help him if he got caught in the crossfire.

He was also beginning to ask more and more questions from what Rafe had been telling me lately and getting wise to the fact that I was never around during the day among other things. I knew that the Masquerade would be in jeopardy when the literary agency was started, but the necessity for a business like it that represented writers in the city was a lucrative idea that I couldn't see passing up.

Like I said, I knew that Rafe didn't like the idea at all. He had made that quite apparent in the conversation that we had a few nights earlier but with no other solution in sight, I knew that I had to take matters into my own hands. His big concern was that he was worried about how Howie would react to the blood bond. Of course I realized that it was a serious issue, but in the overall scheme of things, I knew that we could deal with the problems that may come up because of it. When it came down to a choice between putting off some squashed feelings that were a result of drinking my blood and Howie's life, I could deal with whatever the blood bond would dish out.

One of the most obvious solutions would have been to embrace Rafe. Elvira had just announced recently that since Christina and Jason were no longer permanent residents of the city, they had to be replaced in the security ranks and trained ghouls were the most likely solution. If Rafe were one of the ghouls to be embraced then he could ghoulish Howie himself and we would have nothing to worry about. End of problem.

But Rafe was not ready for the embrace and we were both okay with that. He wanted to spend as much time as possible with his sister, Samantha, and her son, Brendan, and I understood that. It was a hard sell for us that we couldn't have children together and I didn't want to rob him from the time he would have with his nephew or the other children that I was sure Samantha and her husband, AJ McLean, would have in the future.

I wondered how I was going to bring this up to Rafe again as I pulled into the drive and parked the roadster in the garage next to Rafe's Concord but I was coming up empty handed. I knew that I was going to have to reassure him that

this solution was in the best interest of everyone involved and that all I wanted was for all of us to be safe. I didn't know what I would do if something happened to Howie because of his involvement with Rafe and I. He was an innocent in all this, but that didn't matter to some people.

I found Rafe in his office downstairs, working on the computer. He was alone and it was well after eight, so I assumed that Howie had gone home hours ago and I was glad that I had him alone so that I could talk to him first. He was engrossed in the document that was on the screen in front of him and didn't hear me as I came up behind him and kissed his cheek. "Hey," I said as I leaned over his shoulder to have a look myself. "What are you doing?"

"New client," he said after giving me a quick kiss then returning his attention to the screen. "Just trying to get all the paperwork in order before we try to find a publisher for her book. How did things go at the Chantry?"

"Fine," I replied as I straightened and looked down at the back of his head as he continued to enter details of the contract that he was putting together. "Listen, do you have a minute? I really need to talk to you about something."

"Sure," he said. He hit a few more keys then closed the document and turned to look at me. "What's up?"

I moved to his side so that I could lean a hip against the desk, then reached for his hand and put it on my thigh where I left my hand over his. "I just had a talk with Elvira about the possibility of ghouling Howie like I discussed with you the other night." I did my best to keep my voice very calm and low. This was something that Rafe didn't want to talk about anymore, but I knew that I had to deal with it. He considered the subject closed and I knew I was covering what he thought to be covered ground.

He tensed up instantly and looked at me warily. "I thought we agreed I could handle this, Brenda."

I squeezed his hand reassuringly and did my best to appear comforting. "Rafe, I trust your ability to take care of Howie's questions for now, but what about later on when he really begins to ask questions?" I pointed out. "Has he yet begun to ask why he's never seen me during the day?" I knew that he had but I was really trying to make Rafe see my point.

Rafe's brow furrowed with irritation as he looked to the side. "He's asked already."

"How long will you have to dodge his questions before you begin to dread them?" I continued. "Do you really want to risk all the hard work that both of you have put into this business, not to mention your friendship, for me? That's not fair to either of you."

"Brenda, I understand what you're saying, I really do," he said as our eyes met again. "But there has to be some other way we can deal with this."

I leaned forward and touched his face with the tips of my fingers. I knew that what I was about to say was going to sound harsh but the alternatives had to be laid out on the table. Rafe had to understand that this was the only way. "Would you rather we relocate the business out of Salem?" I asked. "Then you would be faced with making the decision of going with Howie to continue to run it with him while I stay here or let Howie run something by himself that the both of you have put a lot of hard work into. Neither sounds like an alternative to me."

Rafe closed his eyes and looked down for a minute. "Brenda, I'm doing everything I can," he said so earnestly that I felt a lump form in my throat at the agony I saw in his eyes. "I'm trying to be a good husband and ghouler to you, keep this business going, plus juggle the demands from your clan and my family. I

thought I was handling everything pretty well. Is there something I'm not taking care of that I should be? Is there something more I can do for you?"

I lowered myself until I was on my knees in front of him and took both his hands in mine. "Rafe, you're perfect," I began, my voice cracking a little. I had to make him understand that this was the only choice we had. "There's nothing else that you could possibly do to make me happier. I love you. What I'm trying to do is ensure our safety. All of us, Howie included. I know that he is your friend and that he means a lot to you. I like him and consider him a friend as well, but he's delicate. He doesn't have the gifts that you do because of my blood and that's all what I want for him. I want to be able to take some of your burden off your shoulders so that you don't have to keep all of this a secret from him anymore. I know that you have a great deal of crap to juggle and this seems like the best alternative."

I could see the war that was waging inside his head. In our time together I had learned how to read his body language more intimately than I ever had Michael's and right now he was trying to find a loophole in what I was saying. He was about to say something that I wouldn't like. "Those gifts didn't help me much with the Sabbath, Brenda," he told me as evenly as possible. "I don't want to see him get hurt because of what you are."

He was right, of course, but that didn't stop me from jerking back away from him as if I had been slapped. "I didn't ask for them to take you," I said lowly, an edge very apparent in my voice as I got to my feet again and backed away. "I know that if it wasn't for me you would have never been in Detroit, much less exposed to the Sabbath like you were. But if it weren't for those gifts, you wouldn't have survived, either Rafe. Would you rather that Howie not have the advantages that you do and wind up dead instead?" I was about five or six feet away from him now and I was pointing at the floor in an effort to make my point.

Rafe got to his feet as well and took my by the shoulders. "No, Brenda, I didn't mean it like that," he said apologetically. "It wasn't your fault the Sabbath-" his voice broke then and he had to look away for a moment to collect himself again before he continued. "I know you would have done anything to stop what they did, and I sure as hell don't regret belonging to you in any way. I love you." He pulled me to his arms then and I buried my face in his neck.

"I love you, too," I told him as my arms went around his waist. I hated it when we didn't agree on things, especially on hot issues like this one but I felt like I had no choice. "I just want everyone to be safe, don't you see. Sam can take care of AJ and Brendan. Chris and Jason aren't here anymore, but they can take care of themselves. And we can take care of each other. Howie is the only one left without protection. I couldn't live with myself if anything happened to him because of his association with me."

"And whose gonna take care of Brian?" he countered, a slight trace of humor in his tone as he ran his hands over my back and his lips brushed my temple. "Or are you thinking of ghoul-ing him too?"

I pulled away from him quickly and walked across the room, berating myself for not thinking of everything as I paced. "I hadn't thought of Brian," I mused, more to myself than to Rafe. "But he doesn't spend as much time here as Howie does. That doesn't mean he could be free from risk as well. Shit. Maybe Sam could extend her power to protect him, too."

"Sam is learning more all the time, I think she could probably handle it," Rafe said from behind me. He had followed me across the room and he was putting his hands on my shoulders again and kissing the back of my head, bringing me

back to reality and the conversation we were having. "Are you sure this is the only way to protect Howie?" he asked as he rested his chin on my shoulder.

"No," I told him as I leaned back against him, happy for his warmth. "It's not the only way, but it's the best that I can think of," I said as I turned to face him again. "It's for the best, Rafe, can't you see that?"

He lifted his hand and took a lock of my hair between his fingers. It was a gesture that had become second nature to both of us during our marriage. I knew in that moment that he would be making the decision if I was going to ghoulish Howie or not, not me. Most Kindred would probably call that weakness on my part, but Rafe's happiness meant more to me than anything else. I didn't care what anyone had to say. I guess it was a reflection of my upbringing. In my family women did work and do other things outside the house, but it was the husband that made the big decisions.

"I don't know Brenda," he began as our eyes met. "Howie's my friend, but it's hard for me to even think of him drinking from you, let alone you feeding from him." He looked very torn about the whole thing but I already knew that this was an issue for him. I was also determined to make whatever deal I had to in order to ensure our safety.

I took his hand that he had been touching my hair with in both of mine. "First of all, I wouldn't feed from him unless I needed the blood, which as you know, wouldn't happen that often," I insisted. Rafe knew that I always kept a full supply of Capri Sun packs in the house at all times. It's a phobia that I have, to stay full all the times, especially after being so low in Detroit after we got Rafe back from the Sabbath. "Secondly, if Howie drinking from me is hard for you, then I can always transfer my vitae to a cup and he can drink from that."

"But the clan was pretty insistent a year ago that I knew what it was like to be fed from, remember?" he pointed out. "I guess it's no big deal, I just know what it's like for us, and I don't want to share that." He lifted my hand and kissed the inside of my wrist and I understood completely what he was talking about. After I had gotten over my initial hesitancy of feeding from him, both of us had greatly enjoyed exchanging blood during intimate times together. I didn't want to share that type of an experience with anyone other than Rafe, either, so in that at least, we agreed.

I smiled at him knowingly and reached up to tuck a lock of his hair behind his ear. "I could never share with anyone what you and I have shared," I confessed truthfully. "You are right, he would have to know what it was like to be fed from but it wouldn't be like it is between you and I and one feeding should be enough for him to understand."

He smiled back at me and tried to hide his worry even though he didn't do very good job of it. He pulled me into his arms again and spoke into my hair as his hands stroked my back again. "I know nothing could be like we have. I just wish there was another way. I know, this is the best way," he finally admitted as his voice dropped. "You're probably right."

What I really feared was that he thought I wanted Howie for extra fun in the bedroom, which couldn't be furthest from the truth. "Rafe, I love you," I assured him earnestly as I leaned back in his arms just enough so that I could look up at him. "I think I understand what's going through your head and let me tell you that there is no way that I want anything else out of this than the reasons I've already given you. I understand that you are hesitant for Howie to become my ghoulish but I need to make sure that we are all protected. That's all."

"What, you think I'm jealous?" he asked with a quick smile that I loved so much and helped to set my own fears aside. "As much as I don't like the thought of you feeding from each other, I trust you, Brenda. God, if Michael couldn't take you away from me, I can't imagine you going after Howie." His smile was a boyish and rather teasing one but he let it fade as he became serious again. "I know you just want what's best for all of us. I just worry; you know how I get sometimes."

"I know," I replied with a nod, glad that he had no idea what my true worries entailed. I hadn't really confided in him that I was afraid Malcolm would come for me next. If I were going to share my thoughts with anyone, it would be him, but I knew that he would try to stay up twenty-four hours a day, trying to protect me and I didn't want him to harm himself when it wouldn't do any good anyway. "I'm worried, too, but this needs to be done and I'll feel a great deal better when it is. And no, I don't think that you are jealous. I just want all the cards out on the table now so that there are no misconceptions later." I lifted my arms and put them around his neck as I continued to look up at him.

"I know." He looked down at me for a long moment, and then nodded. "I hope you're right about this, Brenda. I can't say I completely agree, but I don't see any other way. When did you want to do this?"

"The sooner the better," I replied. "I'm hoping that you will agree to be here and help me broach the subject with him."

"I'll do whatever you need me to, Brenda, but I want you to understand that I won't lie to him about the dangers," Rafe warned.

"He has a right to know everything before he agrees to anything," I conceded, not looking forward to that particular conversation. "But I want you to understand that if this goes wrong and he freaks out, I will have to arrange for his memory to be changed or ghouled him anyhow. This is a big step for all of us."

Rafe's eyes narrowed as he looked down at me. "So what you're saying is that you're going to ghoule him no matter what he wants?"

"I'm saying that we have to be careful in how we present the idea," I explained, hoping that he understood that I was talking about how much information was presented in the beginning. "How we handle ourselves will determine how this will come out in the end." I reached for his left hand where the pinky had to be removed and brought it between us, trying to get him to see that we couldn't tell Howie about what had happened in Detroit until after he had made his decision. I didn't mean to keep that knowledge of what the Sabbat were a secret. I just didn't want to scare the shit out of him in the very beginning.

"I agree that Howie deserves to go into this with his eyes wide open but I don't want to scare him with a bunch of details right away, either. Do you understand what I mean?" Rafe still had issues with what had happened in Detroit and I didn't blame him at all for the way that he felt. And I agreed that Howie had a right to know everything, I didn't want the details of what had happened in Detroit to sway his decision. Those types of things didn't happen every day and I thought that it would make for an unfair advantage.

Rafe thought for a moment about what I said then nodded. "I understand. I'll follow your lead, but if he asks me questions, I can't lie to him."

"I'm not asking you to lie nor would I want you to." I stood up on tiptoe and kissed his cheek, then wiped away any traces of the lipstick that remained. "You know him better than I do," I said without meeting his gaze. "What's the best way to approach him?"

"Well, he's been rather fascinated with the supernatural stuff here in town," Rafe said with a shrug. "In fact he's been soliciting a few horror and science fiction

authors for the agency. Maybe if you appealed to his imagination?" It was obvious that he wasn't real comfortable with me asking for his suggestions about bringing his friend into our world, but he gave his suggestions anyway and I had to give him credit for that.

I understood his unease. He probably felt like he was helping to damn his friend forever and in truth, maybe he was. None of us really knew what lay on the other side of this life so all the religious rigmarole could be true. I caught Rafe's cheek with my fingers and turned his face until his was looking at me. "Would you rather that I handle this on my own?" I asked tenderly. "If you are uncomfortable doing this, I'll make the initial approach by myself." It was the last thing that I wanted to do but I didn't want to force him into doing something that he was uncomfortable participating in.

"No," he said quickly. "I want to be there with you. I just don't want to tell you to approach him one way and have it backfire. This could go south so easily, Bren. How the hell does this normally work? I mean, not everyone has to have blood to heal when the ghouling starts."

I smiled and pulled him closer with the arms that I still had around his neck. "I'm sorry that you feel like you're in the middle. Don't worry, I'll think of a way to approach him. What's he doing tonight?"

I felt him shrug in my arms as he dipped his head to kiss my temple. "I think he said something about picking up Chinese and going home, but that was a couple of hours ago. Do you want me to call and see if he'll come over?"

"Yes, please," I said as I took a half a step back. I didn't want to leave the solace of his arms. It was the only time lately when I felt any trace of safety but there were things that needed to be accomplished yet tonight. "I'm going to go upstairs and change. Will you join me when you're done?"

He nodded with a quick smile and pulled me back for a lingering kiss before I went up to our bedroom to change. He joined me there about ten minutes later as I finished with the last of the buttons on the white blouse that I had changed into. I had also donned a comfortable pair of faded jeans and a pair of black boots. It was odd, but ever since Christina's disappearance I had felt the need to not be so concerned all the time with how I looked. Deep down I think that it had something to do with how I had treated her on that last night when I had donned my Ventrue-style attire and went off on her. I knew that I would always feel guilty about the horrible things that I said to her even though I felt justified at the time. Now it was hard for me to not link what I'd said with the type of clothing that I'd done it in. But there was no way that I could have gone to the Chantry in jeans; Elvira wouldn't have liked it at all.

"He'll be here in about twenty minutes," Rafe reported as I pulled a brush through my hair. "I told him that you wanted to talk to him about something."

"Okay," I replied as I glanced at him, checking to make sure he was still okay with everything. It was obvious that he was nervous about the meeting but I was trying to keep a positive attitude about it. "Have you eaten?"

Rafe nodded. "I thought about making something to snack on," he said. "Maybe have something strong to drink on hand." I flashed him an odd look, knowing that Rafe didn't drink alcohol; he couldn't, because he was severely allergic. I remembered one night on our honeymoon when he had accidentally taken a drink from the cocktail that I had ordered for looks at a show that we were seeing and within a half an hour he was in the bathroom puking his guts out. Then I realized that he was thinking of Howie and how the news of what I was would affect him and the suggestion made sense. I made a mental note to check the

bottle of Scotch in the study to make sure that it was full for Howie's visit as I put the brush on the dresser again.

We went downstairs and Rafe helped me put together some finger snacks on a tray and we had everything assembled in the study in record timing. I had brought downstairs with me a silver chalice that I used for rituals and placed it discretely on the built-in bookshelf on one wall. If Howie said yes to becoming my ghoul, I would use the chalice to put my blood in for him to drink but I didn't want to use it as a centerpiece and have it on the table next to the food, either.

Around five minutes after nine the front doorbell rang and a few minutes after that, we were all sitting in the study, Rafe and I sitting on the couch and Howie across from us in a chair.

Chapter 2 – Presentation Is Key

"I am a bull fire

I am a vampire."

Garbage

"#1 Crush"

We chatted for a few minutes on how things were going with the agency and other topics of light conversation. Rafe informed Howie that the contract for the new writer they were taking on would be ready in the morning and Howie ribbed him by saying that he was working when he should have been spending time with his wife after business hours. He also teased Rafe on how healthy the snacks were and how surprised he was that Rafe had served him soda instead of the organic teas he was always trying to shove on him.

As the conversation began to wind down I knew that it was time for me to take the plunge. It was nice to have this time of normalcy after the amount of Kindred influence in my life but there were things to accomplish tonight so I cleared my throat.

"Howie," I began as I reached over to take Rafe's hand. His palm was sweating a little and his hand clutched mine tightly. I squeezed it reassuringly as I leaned closer to him until our shoulders were touching. I think that I needed contact just as much as he did. "I asked Rafe to invite you over so that I could talk to you about something."

I watched as Howie sat back in his chair and propped an ankle on one knee as he looked between the two of us questioningly. It was something that I had seen him do numerous times in the short period of time that I had known him and I also knew that it was his way of settling in to listen. "That's what Rafe said," he said in an even tone.

"Rafe mentioned that you have been a little taken with the occult and supernatural since moving to Salem," I commented, trying to ease into the subject as I picked a piece of imaginary lint off the couch cushion. "Is it something you've always been interested in?"

Howie frowned a little; I assumed because he didn't understand why I would ask him over just to talk about something as trivial as his interest in the paranormal. "Somewhat," he replied slowly as a small smile curved on his lips. "You can't live in the Occult Capital of America without developing an interest."

I smiled in return and glanced over at Rafe again. He was still nervous, but the clues were subtle ones and would be hard for someone to pick up on unless you knew him well enough. I hated to see his green eyes troubled but I knew that I couldn't rush things. "No, you can't really," I replied with a smile. "If you don't mind me asking, what have you been looking into?"

Again, he looked at me with an expression that said 'you brought me here for this?' "The usual," he said with a casual shrug. "Witches, ghosts, werewolves... vampires."

At the last word, a curious look crossed his face, but it was gone quickly, prompting me to wonder what he was feeling. Quickly using my ability to read auras, I saw a swirl of different colors that told me he was feeling conservative, calm and slightly confused. I was hesitant to take the time to read his thoughts to see if something clicked in his mind. I would have to confess what I would know

soon enough and so far things seemed to be going alright, at least he wasn't scared shitless.

"Who have you been talking to?" I pressed. "There are some people in town who tend to blow things out of proportion, but there are others who take these things very seriously."

Howie put both feet on the floor again and leaned forward so that his elbows were propped on his knees. His large brown eyes studied me for a moment before he spoke. "I don't know, some people in town, shop owners mostly," he began as his gaze dropped to his hands that were dangling between his knees. "And you know AJ always has some half baked theory about one thing or another running through his quirky mind. But I make it a rule never to take him seriously. Why? What's this all about?" he asked as he looked up again.

Before I said another word I glanced in Rafe's direction again then returned my attention toward Howie. There was really no way to creep around the issue anymore than I already had, but I still had to be careful since I didn't know how he was going to react to the truth. "Is there anything about me that you've questioned?"

Howie glanced at Rafe as if looking for whatever it was that I was fishing for. And for his part Rafe was doing a really great job of remaining calm, but I couldn't ignore that fact that his hand gripped mine tighter where they both rested on his thigh.

Howie's features took on the look of a person who was beginning to get really uncomfortable with this line of questioning. "Look, what is this about, Brenda?"

I rose from my seat next to Rafe and walked over to the window to look out into the inky, black night. Now that the moment of truth was at hand I found myself wondering how I could proceed. How could I tell this man what I was? He had no knowledge of the world that Rafe and I lived in, but he had to in order to be properly protected.

Taking a deep breath that I didn't need, I turned and met Howie's gaze steadily. "I'm sure that you've questioned the fact that you've never seen me during the day. That while I do eat sometimes, that it's never a lot. I know that you have brushed my arm on occasion while we working on things for the company and you have commented that I'm always cold. What do these things mean to you?"

"Well it could mean a lot of things, Brenda," Howie replied, his voice never betraying any sign of nervousness as he smiled casually. "Are you trying to tell me that you're bulimic?"

I shook my head no as I glanced at Rafe to gage his reaction. He seemed to be doing fine for now but I wasn't about to fool myself into thinking that this couldn't go bad at any moment.

"No, Howie, I am not bulimic, unfortunately," I told him as I moved along the back of the couch where I had been sitting with Rafe and leaned against it behind him. "This is a very hard thing for me to admit." I looked down at Rafe and felt my lips curve into a slight smile as I spoke wistfully, "It was so much easier with Rafe. He knew from the beginning what I was. I didn't have to tell him anything."

As calmly as possible, I lifted my eyes until they met Howie's over Rafe's head and without further hesitation I said, "Howie, I am a vampire."

"I knew it," he said half under his breath as he quickly moved his head to one side and covered his eyes with one hand. His reply confirmed what I had though all along, that he had been wondering what I was and had in fact taken a very logical guess. In reality, there was only one possible conclusion with the clues

that he had been given but it was always hard to learn that my acting hadn't been that good.

Silence clung around the room for a few moments as he took this new knowledge in, then he faced us again and I was glad to see that his face was as calm as could be expected in a situation like this one. "What are we talking here - blood sucking fiend...creature of the night? Turn into mist...fly through the air?"

"There are some myths that are true and others that aren't," I said answered truthfully. "I understand that this is a lot for you to take in right now, Howie, but there is a reason that I am telling you this now."

Howie stilled, his eyes locked on my face. "Okay," he said slowly, as if he wasn't sure if he wanted me to continue. There was no turning back now. I had to go on.

"I live by a code," I said, trying to keep things simple for the moment. "A set of laws, if you will. Where, you know, we don't exactly publicize what we are. That we exist."

"So why are you telling me all this now?" he asked.

"You are a person that spends a great deal of time in my home, practically on a daily basis. You have access to just about every area of my sanctuary, my haven. This is the place that I have to keep protected at all costs. Not only for me, but for my clan as well."

I could see that he was confused by my words and I was quick to explain, "My clan is the group of vampires that I am descended from but that isn't the point. I'm not saying that I distrust you in any way, Howie. If I did, then you would have never gained access to begin with. You are Rafe's friend and he trusts you. That's enough for me. But there have been recent events that have happened not only in this city, but Detroit as well, that bring me to talk to you now."

"Does this have something to do with Christina?" he asked as his eyes narrowing slightly. He wasn't stupid and I applauded him for tying things together so quickly. There was no way that we could have kept all the details as to why Christina no longer lived here hidden, even though Rafe was injured when we got back. We had been forced to come up with a story to tell Howie and Brian that would make them understand without giving away any major details about either incident.

"In a round about way, yes, but not entirely," I replied. I knew that I was being vague but I didn't want to explain any more about what had happened with my sister, so I pressed on. "In your study of the supernatural, what do you know of ghouls?"

His face contorted with confusion. "Renfield?" he asked, bringing up the most popular ghoul in literature. Too bad his portrayal was the furthest from the truth.

"That's such a common misconception," I replied as I glanced quickly down at Rafe and found that he is still pretty nervous but he was doing okay. The worst was over; Howie knew what I was and was still sitting here calmly. That had to mean something. "What else?" I asked.

Howie thought for a moment. "Other than the whole Renfield thing, there is a set of books where a person gets a physical mark from the Master vampire of the city."

I immediately recognized the recent work of an author by the name of Laurel Hamilton. Her series dealt with the life of a female hunter of supernatural creatures and she also happened to have the ability to raise the dead. I had actually read a few of the books from the series and found most of them fairly interesting, even

though the plotline reminded me of the Brenda Moorecock that lived in the other dimension the Sabbath sent us to last year.

"Yes, I have heard of those books," I commented as I moved around the couch to stand next to Rafe and I put my hand on his shoulder. "Not only is Rafe the man I love and my husband, he is also my ghoul."

Howie looked at Rafe in surprise, and Rafe nodded his head slightly in return. "I have been for just over a year now."

"A year?" Howie said in surprise as his brown eyes darted to me again.

"At least once a month Rafe must drink my vitae, my blood," I explained as our eyes met and held. "And with that he gains abilities. He will never go old. He will never die from old age."

"No wonder you've been lookin' so good lately, bro," Howie said with a wide smile that helped to lighten the moment. So far he seemed to be taking everything in stride and I was really glad. I began to hope that things would turn out okay in the end as I looked at Howie again.

I smiled in return and squeezed my husband's shoulder as I felt him relax a little under my hand. "He has also gained other special abilities. Extra strength, healing abilities and so on. And with these abilities he has an advantage over the average person."

I was looking down at him again as I spoke my next few words and I could feel a lump form in my throat as I said them. "He, like me, can still die..." I had to stop for fear that I might choke and Rafe reached up to cover my hand with his and squeezed gently. It took me a minute, but when I had control of myself again I continued. "But he has gained enough that he is of aid to me when I need it," I managed to say.

I glanced at Howie again and saw that he was regarding us uncertainly. "I know that this is a lot to take in at once," I told him.

"No," he commented as he adjusted himself again in the chair and propped his elbow on the arm of the chair. "I'm just wondering what you could possibly need help with, for one thing, and for another, why are you telling me this?"

"I'm telling you this because, as I mentioned earlier, you do have access to my home, therefore, that makes you a target by association to those that might wish to get to me," I told him. "You and others that are around me."

"Like this Malcolm that Rafe was talking about," Howie pointed out as if we were talking about any other mundane topic. There was no way for him to understand how unpredictable this man could be. Eventually he would have to know the entire story, but there was time for that later.

I nodded, deciding to give him a little of the mage's background. "Yes. Right now Malcolm is probably my biggest concern. But he isn't all that's out there." It was the first time that I could remember voicing my fear that Malcolm would come for me next out loud. It was a dread that I tried very hard to hide from Rafe and I made sure not to look at him as I spoke but I couldn't ignore his hand as it reached for mine again and squeezed tightly.

"Is Malcolm a vampire, too?" Howie asked.

"No. Malcolm is a mage, a magic user," I told him. "Like human beings, there are those of my kind that are good, and those that are evil. In return, there are good mages and others that aren't so good. We in turn need to make provisions to hold this city for the Camarilla, the group of vampires that I belong to, from those with evil intent that would exploit the innocent people who live here. There are people like this all around you. There are people that you can pass in the sidewalk everyday that have to hide what they are."

Howie's interest was peaked as he regarded Rafe and me. "Like anybody else I know?" He was beginning to see that there was an entire network of people who lived along side the normal world and thankfully he was intrigued by it. His eyes were practically dancing with possibilities as he regarded Rafe and I.

There was no need to tell him everything now. After all, he hadn't yet agreed to become my ghoul and the less I told him now meant the less that would have to be removed later if he declined my offer. "Yes, there are other people that you know that belong to these other groups. I don't want to bog you down right now with too much information because I'm trying to keep this as simple as possible."

As I spoke he seemed to come back to reality a little and he returned to listening to what I was saying. "Howie, there's something that I need to ask you. As I said before you are open. You're vulnerable. I would like to make you a proposition."

Almost as if he sensed what was about to come next, Howie rose and went to the bar where he poured a good three fingers high of scotch in a glass tumbler, then proceeded to drink it down in one shot. He didn't turn to us right away, taking a few minutes to look out the window behind the bar and gathered his thoughts. It was odd to watch how quickly his moods could change.

In the time I'd known Howie I'd come to see that he was a multifaceted person who cared for someone just as fiercely as he could hate him or her. I also knew that he always thought things through before making a decision. What he was doing now was taking a moment to really think about what he had just learned.

I again feared what was going on in his head so I first looked at his aura, and this time decided to probe his thoughts as well. I had no intention of altering any decision that he might make, but I wanted to be prepared to answer any question or argument that he might come up with. Sure it was a little high-handed, but it was my life that I was gambling with and I was prepared to do just about whatever I had to in order to secure my home and friends. I couldn't allow Malcolm to catch me off guard again. No matter what.

Looking at his aura I could see that Howie was confused and afraid, and I realized that those emotions were to be expected. But the conservative and idealistic hues of his aura helped put my mind at ease. He was semi-distrustful and I understood that as well but I was relieved to see that there wasn't hatred or any other negative emotions like it that meant he would say no right away.

I then turned toward the thoughts that were running through his mind. I almost smiled as I realized that Howie was contemplating pouring himself another drink and downing it as quickly as he had the first. He was also thinking how my revelation had confirmed everything that he had wondered about concerning what I was. He was also wondering why Rafe had never told him what was going on. A year was a long time and Howie considered Rafe his best friend. His last thought that I was able to reach was that he knew what I was going to ask him and he didn't know how he was going to answer.

I understood that Howie felt a little betrayed because Rafe had never disclosed to him everything that had been going on in his life but the Masquerade had dictated otherwise for both of us. "Neither Rafe nor I could tell you about what I was," I told him out loud. "We are bound by the laws of my kind."

Howie turned to the scotch decanter again and poured himself another drink. To my relief he didn't down it this time. Instead, he turned to face Rafe and I calmly and took a drink as his eyes met mine.

"It is very important to me that those around me have the ability to protect themselves," I said as I continued to build my case before I actually asked him to become my ghoul. "It stands to reason that if those who are around me have the ability to protect themselves they can, in return, help to protect me as well. Obviously, I am incapacitated during the day, as are others of my kind. And like me, they have their own ghouls who have the ability to get to those in my care during the day." My hand was still on Rafe's shoulder and I as I spoke I felt my heart constrict as I thought of him being in the hands of the Sabbath while we were in Detroit.

"You must have a lot of enemies," Howie commented.

"I have enough to worry about," I replied, not wanting to completely scare him off, while letting him know at the same time that the danger to this existence was real. "There are those out there that would kill me for what I am. The Inquisition was real and it still exists. It's not a few pages taken from a history book. It's real."

Howie's eyes widened as I spoke and I regretted saying more than I intended. Before I succeeded in totally scaring him off, I continued. "I'm asking you if you would consent to become my ghoul as well."

Chapter 3 - He Said, Yes

"A night of magic, fate is sealed."

Erasure

"Save Me Darling"

Howie took another long drink while I talked, but he seemed to be okay with everything. I moved to sit on the arm of the couch next to Rafe and placed my foot on the cushion between his thigh and the arm of the couch. He reached up and placed his hand on my thigh and I welcomed his warmth as we waited for Howie to answer.

"What's the down side?" Howie asked after a moment. "I mean you talked about extra strength and healing ability and all, but what's the downside?"

"Of course the main thing is that you must keep this a secret," I told him as I felt some of the tension drain away that had developed in my shoulders throughout the course of our conversation. "You keep the knowledge of what I am, what my kind is, a secret."

I knew that this would be hard for him. Howie had a large family with many brothers and sisters that all lived in various places in Florida. It would be difficult for him to explain things to them and eventually he would have to break ties with them completely when it became apparent that he wasn't aging. By that time though, we would probably have to leave Salem anyhow, or at the very least, change our names and keep out of the general populace in the city.

At least he and Rafe would have each other to talk things over with. For the first time I wondered who Rafe had talked to when he was frustrated with the confines of his secret. Of course Samantha knew what we both were, but I didn't know how open Rafe was with her about the subject or if he wanted to confided to her about anything. He was the big brother after all, and wanted to portray that he was a rock in case it was she that needed him.

"You can't tell your family about what you would be, what I am," I explained to Howie. "The next thing is that becoming my ghoul would mean that you would become blood bound to me."

"And what does that mean," he asked as his forehead creased questioningly and an ironic smile spread across his face. "That you tie me up with blood or something?"

I smiled at his obvious attempt at humor. "No, that means that to an extent, my blood in your body makes you more inclined to do what I want you to do if I were to force the issue."

The look that crossed his features spoke volumes that he didn't like that possibility at all and I was quick to explain. "You don't loose you free will," I assured him as I held out my hand to stop him when he was about to speak. "But you would be more likely to do what I asked if I wanted to press the issue. Say for instance, I wanted you to wear a pink suit to an event and you didn't want to. If I wanted to directly ask you to wear the suit, then you would want to do it to please me." I understood all too well how the blood bond sounded and there was really no way to make it sound good. "But that is something that I don't do."

Howie's eyes moved to Rafe who shook his head to affirm what I was saying. "She doesn't do that," he told his friend.

"There are Kindred who do just that," I explained next, wanting to clarify that some ghouls weren't treated as equally as others. "Some vampires make their ghouls their servants in every way, even if that means demeaning them. That is not what I'm out for. I want to make sure that you are protected and in return you can help protect me."

"Okay let me get this straight," Howie said, as he held up his hand that still held the glass, and used his first finger to point upward. "You want me to drink your blood to gain abilities so that you can protect me, so that I in return can help protect you from all your enemies. What happens if I say no?"

Well, at least the scotch hadn't clouded his thinking yet. "Then I call over one of my clansmen, whose powers are greater than mine, to perform some mumbo jumbo and you forget the conversation we just had," I said calmly. "And the offices for Prosperous Word will be forced to be moved, probably out of this city."

I felt Rafe stiffen next to me and I put my hand on the back of his neck and gave him a little squeeze to let him know everything was okay. Howie had stayed this long, that meant that the odds were in our favor. We just had to ride it out a little longer.

"And if I say yes?"

"It will take three consecutive nights to complete the process," I explained. "There are three stages of drinking my vitae that you will go through before you are fully bound to me. We can begin the process this evening."

"What happens after that?"

"We go on as before," I replied with a slight shrug. "You would continue to run the business with Rafe and you would continue to live your life as before. I had to get permission in order to make this offer to you and part of the terms that came with me getting that permission is that you need to help with the security at the Chantry." His brow creased again and I quickly explained. "I know that a lot of this doesn't make sense right now, but I will explain everything in time, I promise."

"Chantry," he said. "Isn't that where groups of mages come together?"

I nodded. "Yes. My clan is the House Tremere. We are the vampiric mages."

He cocked an eyebrow and said, "Spooky boo."

"Yes," I said with a smile as I looked down at Rafe who grinned, too, even though he was still really nervous. "God, I thought that Jason moved out," I commented to him and his grin widened as he squeezed my thigh slightly. That was what Jason had always called the magic that my sister and I had practiced.

"So, I would have to go to this Chantry and learn how to protect it?" Howie was asking.

"Yes," I answered as my hand moved across Rafe's back slowly.

"Where is this Chantry?"

There was no way that I could tell him that until he had agreed to my offer. "It's here in town," I told him. "The location will become quite apparent when I have to present you to the prince when you are fully bound."

Howie fell silent as he continued to roll things over in his mind. Suddenly something clicked in his head and his eyes met mine again. "Is Christina a vampire?" he asked suddenly.

My eyes closed defensively as I quietly answered, "Yes."

"Jason?"

"Yes."

"Not Frasier," he said absently to himself as he continued to put two and two together. "He used to go out with us during the day."

"Ghoul," I interjected.

"Jason's?"

"No."

"Christina's," he said with a triumphant grin.

"Yes," I said with a slight smile. I almost felt like a mother who was watching her child figure things out for themselves for the first time. It was kind of fun to watch actually.

"It all makes sense now," he said as his gaze moved from Rafe to me, and back again. His expression was a cross between amazement and fascination and I began to think again that things were going to be okay. "Bruce?" he asked after a moment, referring to the vampire I had adopted a few years ago. I nodded. "But he lives with Rachel. Is she a ghoul?"

"No. Rachel is a mage," I informed him.

"She's a witch?"

"She's a mage," I corrected sternly.

Another realization fell over him and Howie looked at Rafe in astonishment. "Does that mean that Sam is a mage?"

Rafe didn't utter a word as he nodded.

Howie let the thought mull in his head for a minute. "Is AJ...whatever a mage's ghoul is then?"

"They do have people who aid them but I don't know what they are called," I said with a slight shrug. "AJ and Brendan fall under her protection."

"Is Brendan a mage?" he asked next.

"He could be," I said as I glanced down at Rafe and found that he was smiling at the thought that his nephew could one day wield magical power like his mother. "When he gets older. Or he could have other natural abilities like Rafe did before I ghoul'd him."

Howie's gaze swung to Rafe questioningly.

"I just always knew when people were different," Rafe answered his friend's silent question with a shrug. "You know vampires...werewolves...ghosts." His eyes met mine at the mention of ghosts and we shared a silent moment of reflection together about the one that he had seen in the Chantry soon after he had been ghoul'd.

From the corner of my eye I saw Howie raise the glass to his lips again to take a drink before he regarded me with a steady gaze. "Vampires drink blood then, right? Does that mean that you would drink my blood?"

"Not normally," I assured him. "I have a supply of blood that I keep here at the house in a special location. But if the need was to arise and I needed to then, yes, I would have to feed from you in order to survive. I don't want to say that you will never be fed from, but the likelihood of that happening is very slim. But it's important that you know what it's like to be fed from. That was a lesson that when I was a ghoul, I was never given."

"You were a ghoul?" he asked as his brows shot up in surprise.

I nodded again. "I was a ghoul."

"Who was your master?" he interrupted curiously.

"You have never met him," I said, not wanting to talk about Michael when Rafe was sitting right next to me. "He doesn't live in this city."

The damage was already done, though. I felt Rafe tense under my hand and I patted his back reassuringly as I used my other hand to turn his face toward mine so that I could kiss his cheek.

Howie turned once again to look out the window behind the bar and he fell silent as he continued to think about everything we had just talked about. I wasn't too worried at first because this was the type of person Howie was. He was very introspective and remained quiet while he thought until he had arrived at his decision.

Rafe and I maintained our silent vigil on the couch as minutes passed by and Howie continued to remain quiet. I checked his aura from time to time to gauge where his thoughts were and found that his aura was the same as it had been earlier and that now a pale blue, that signified calm, was falling over him.

The longer he stood there, though, the more tense Rafe became and when he almost rose to his feet to speak, I stopped him and made him sit again. "He's thinking," I whispered as he settled next to me again. "He's okay. Use your ability to read auras."

I didn't want to invade Howie's thoughts again but I was dying to know what he was thinking. I closed my eyes and opened my mind to his and found that he was considering what it would be like to drink blood and be fed from. He was also thinking about the dangers that we had discussed earlier and how he was going to keep all this from his family. There was still some conflict in his thoughts but for the most part I got the impression that he would agree to my offer so I quickly left his mind and waited for him to speak.

Eventually, he turned and faced us again then addressed his friend. "Is this something that you think I should do?" he asked Rafe.

I looked at Rafe, wondering how he would answer. I knew that this wasn't the ideal situation for him and he had already told me that he wouldn't lie to his friend. Rafe looked him in the eye for a moment then answered. "It's the best solution."

It seemed that that was all he needed because Howie sighed then looked at me with a committed expression in his dark eyes. "Okay. How do we begin?"

A small smile formed on my lips and I absently ran my hand over Rafe's back as I took a moment to make sure that I had told Howie all the major points that becoming a ghoul would cover. As far as I could tell, I had but I wanted to make sure that I hadn't missed anything key. My gaze fell on the silver chalice where I had placed it earlier on the bookshelf and I suddenly remembered something that my sire, Antonio Moreno, had once told me.

"Tradition is important," he had said. "The ritual is sometimes more important than the outcome, childe. Always remember that."

The random thought got me thinking. By Howie making the decision to become my ghoul, his life was about to change forever. This was probably the biggest choice of his life and suddenly, that silver chalice looked out of place and dirty for the situation. I also realized that even though I didn't intend to feed Howie straight from me all the time, he still needed to know what the act was like. I knew that Rafe and I had already talked about this and had come to a decision that we could both live with, but I hoped that he would understand that I was changing my mind.

I stood as I reached for Rafe's hand and pulled him to his feet as well. I met his eyes for a moment and saw that his green depths were finally clear from tension for the first time that evening but I could see that doubt still plagued his strong features and I smiled at him as I squeezed his hand. I felt a slight pressure as he squeezed back but I was already turning my attention to Howie. I held out my free hand to him and he put the glass down on the bar as he pushed himself away from

it and came forward hesitantly to take my hand. Then I propelled them both until we were free from the couch and had enough room for what had to be done.

I noticed that Howie kept an eye on Rafe, almost as if he were making an attempt to insure that he didn't offend him by anything he did. When I spoke, it was more to Rafe than Howie. "Normally when you feed from me, I will have you drink from a cup. But it's important that you be exposed to all aspects of what feeding is like, just in a case you have to feed from me or anyone else in an emergency." I could tell from his expression that Rafe didn't like the idea but he wasn't voicing his disapproval, either. I knew that I would have to explain to him later why I choose to do things differently than we had discussed, but in my heart I felt that this was the best course of action.

Finally, my eyes went to and rested on Howie. "For the first three times I will have you feed from me," I told him.

He didn't respond, but instead glanced at Rafe as if he sensed something was going down differently than it had been intended. "Rafe and I had a discussion about this earlier and this is how I choose to deal with this situation," I told him. "Feeding can be a very intimate act and because Rafe and I share this on an even more intimate level..."

They were both blushing by now, but I continued. "I'm explaining this so we're all clear on this. It's important for you to experience the feeding and know it for what it is. This is ceremonial. What we are about to do is bring you into this new form of existence. It should be given the respect that it deserves."

I looked to Rafe and whispered, "I hope that you understand this."

It was obvious that he didn't, but he must have understood enough because he nodded after a moment and squeezed my hand reassuringly. I rose on tiptoe to kiss his cheek in thanks and I knew that everything was okay when he turned his head allowed me to kiss his lips instead.

Standing flatfooted again, I turned my attention to Howie. "I am going to lower my fangs now and I am going to pierce the skin of my wrist." As I spoke, I undid the button at my wrist and rolled the sleeve back and away. In that moment I realized that it had been a while since I had fed Rafe and suddenly I knew that I wanted to include him in this 'ritual' as well. I wanted him to be just as involved as Howie. It would mean depleting my body of even more blood than I had intended, but I could gain it back again easily enough with the provisions that were on hand in the house.

I lowered my fangs and did my best to hide them from Howie. I didn't turn away from him like I had with Rafe the first time, but I didn't flash them either. I didn't feel as timid as I had when I had ghouled Rafe and now felt more at ease with allowing mortals to see proof of my vampiric nature. I guess most of my hesitancy with Rafe had to do with the fact that I didn't want him to be turned off by my fangs and with Howie it didn't matter.

Chapter 4 – Teaching the New House Rules

*“I’m the one they feed upon
Give a bit, a star is born.”*

*No Doubt
“Hey Baby”*

I bit into the flesh of my left wrist and allowed the blood to well a little, and then I held it out to Howie. At first he seemed hesitant and looked at Rafe for instruction. Rafe motioned for him to take it to his mouth and drink. When he did gently take my arm in his hands, the first thing that I noticed was how warm he was as he put his lips to my skin and began to drink tentatively.

Once I was sure he was doing okay, I turned to Rafe as I allowed my teeth to puncture my tongue and I put my free hand around the back of his neck so that I could pull him to me for my kiss. I felt Howie’s hold on my arm tighten as he drank deeply and when he realized what I was doing; Rafe pulled me into his arms and he was quickly lost himself in our kiss.

It’s hard to describe what it was like to have two people feed from me at once. It was the first time for me and it’s a common fact that feeding is actually the most intense form of pleasure that a Kindred can experience. That was part of the reason Rafe had a problem with the thought of Howie feeding from me to begin with.

To be blunt, I liked it. A lot. Waves of sensation flooded through my body from the two locations where I was being fed from and the feeling was like a powerful orgasm. I moaned deeply in Rafe’s mouth as he suckled my tongue and pulled me even closer to him.

Because he had more experience, Rafe finished before Howie did, which gave me a chance to close the openings in my tongue and pull myself together a little before I had to stop Howie. Rafe and I were both aroused, Rafe a little more obviously than me and I positioned my body so that I stood between him and Howie as he finished drinking a pint and I coaxed my arm away.

I my relief, Howie pulled away easy enough when I prompted him and I brought my wrist to my mouth to lick the wound closed. His eyes widened in amazement as I did and I noticed that he had some blood left at the corner of his mouth. Without thinking about it, I reached out and wiped the blood from his cocoa skin and absently licked it from my finger.

I watched as the blood began to affect him and he turned away and went to the bookshelf to collect himself, his back to Rafe and me. I looked over my shoulder and tried to get Rafe to go to Howie, but for some reason he wouldn’t. I didn’t understand his hesitancy, chalking it up to the fact that he didn’t have control of himself yet and therefore would be of no use in talking Howie through the after effects of his first feeding anyway.

So I went to him and gently laid my hand on his shoulder as I rounded his body so that I stood in front of him. What I succeeded in doing was startling him and Howie pulled away as he continued to reorient himself.

“I understand what you’re feeling, I’ve been there myself,” I told him in a soothing voice as I remember the first time I had ever drank from Michael and how I had felt. “Close your eyes.”

He put his hand back on the bookcase to steady himself as he did what I suggested. I looked over his shoulder and tried again to get Rafe's attention so that he would come over to his friend. I didn't want to be the one comforting Howie. I had to keep my distance now so that I didn't promote a closeness that was anything more than the friendship we had shared before tonight. This was a dangerous time for Howie and I, and I had to be careful.

Rafe must have gotten control of himself again because he came over and put his hand on Howie's back and began to talk him through what he was feeling. "I know that it's a lot to handle and that you feel really strong," he said. "You just have to breathe through it and get adjusted to what you're feeling. It won't always be this way. You'll always feel strong but it won't be this overwhelming."

Howie turned his head and looked at Rafe as if his voice alone would be what it took to guide him through the river of sensations he was feeling. They talked quietly to each other for a few minutes and I moved to the couch, giving them the space they needed. After a time, they joined me and the two men snacked while Howie began to ask questions about what my existence entailed.

I gave him an overview of the basics, including a more detailed version of the Masquerade and went over how the laws would affect him. I also told him about the different clans in the city and gave him their nicknames and went over the independent clans. When I mentioned the Sabbath, however, Rafe quickly got to his feet and grabbed the empty soda bottle from the coffee table.

"I'm going to get some more soda," he said as he hastily edged his way toward the doorway. "I'll be right back."

Howie watched him go and I felt my face crumple a little because I knew why he didn't want to be in the room while I talked about the vampires who had tortured him. "What's going on that you're not telling me?" Howie asked.

"The Sabbath stand for everything that we don't," I said, my voice harsh with the anger that I still felt over what had happened. "They are evil. They believe that humans are their cattle and that they should be treated as such."

"And this bothers Rafe?" he asked confused.

"A great deal," I replied. "And with good reason." I quickly told him about the pack that had tried to take over the city a year ago and that it was the leader of that pack who turned up in Detroit when we were there to find Christina. He had escaped from the dungeon of the Chantry and had formed the new pack that had kidnapped Rafe and Frasier during the day while I slept. "He was tortured by them...", I trailed off, unable to continue the story.

Howie was obviously upset by what I had told him and I knew that I wasn't doing a very good job of hiding how I felt either. He reached over the coffee table and touched my arm in an effort to comfort me. "But he's okay now," he pointed out.

"He's okay now," I repeated, trying to convince myself as much as I tried to convince him. I didn't want to say that I feared Rafe still wasn't sleeping well. There had been many a night when I rose and found the dark circles under his eyes that had left me wondering if he had slept at all. He refused to answer when I questioned him about it and I was too scared to probe his mind to find out. He had been so violated already; I didn't want to add to it.

"There are still remnants that linger," I confessed, not sure why I was telling Howie this. "I think that he will be haunted for the rest of his life and that's what I will have to deal with."

"You will take care of him," Howie pointed out. "I know how much you love him."

My eyes met his for the first time since telling him of Rafe's kidnapping and I smiled a little. "I do love him with all my heart."

"But we not only protect you, we protect each other," Howie now said, as if he were ready to do whatever it took to keep all of us safe. Like he was the father and great protector for us all.

"You are more so like brothers now," I told him and was almost blinded by the smile that spread across his features. It was obvious that he liked the idea but before he could comment, Rafe came back with a fresh bottle of soda and some Twinkies that were left over from when Frasier had lived in the house. He and Howie joked with each other that the Twinkies were actually from Rafe's secret stash that he never let anyone know he maintained for when he was alone.

After they had settled down, I then explained to Howie that I would teach him about the disciplines he inherited with my vitae after the blood bond was completed and that Rafe would be able to help him develop them.

"Yeah, just watch out for vases, man." Rafe said dryly as he put an arm around my shoulders and pulled me close to him on the couch. "They break really easily." I looked up at him disapprovingly but chose not to be provoked by his statement and didn't comment on his attempt to make light of the time when he'd been really hurt because he hadn't known how to control his boosted strength during the early days after I had ghouled him.

We spent the next two hours going over the stereotypical things that effect vampires like crosses, and garlic that only affected some of my kind to the big things that concerned all of us like sunlight and fire. We also talked about the Inquisition house in town and I shared with him what I knew about mages and werewolves so that he had a few things to think over and could ask me about later.

Rafe finally relaxed in those hours while the three of us talked. So far Howie hadn't changed how he looked at me but I knew that we still had two more feedings before the bond was complete and only time would tell how things would be for us.

After a while Rafe suggested that he and Howie go out for a drive so that they could have a private conversation. I was relieved that he seemed to feel better about the situation and I figured that it was time that they had a chance to talk about things on their own.

I passed the time by going over to Mickey's Import/Export business to work on the books while Rafe and Howie were gone. I also used the opportunity to drink back some of the blood that I had given the two of them while I worked.

When I got home a few hours later, I phoned Elvira to tell her that the ghouling process had begun and to inform her that I would present Howie to her when he was fully bound.

"I look forward to meeting him," the Prince told me. "I remember him from the wedding but I didn't get a chance to talk to him."

"You'll like him," I replied as I heard Howie's car pull into the driveway to drop Rafe off. It was nearly four a.m. so I said good night to Elvira and reassured her that everything was going fine.

I met Rafe as he came in from the quiet night that had suddenly turned chilly and from his reaction; everything had gone well during their 'talk'. Rafe said that he told Howie about the clan and how things worked for ghouls, the pecking order, rank; and how ghouls were supposed to act and so on.

I apologized to him for shifting gears in the middle like I did when I decided to have Howie feed from me instead of drinking from the cup.

"I understand," he said as he pulled me into his arms so that he could kiss my forehead. Then he pulled back and looked at me. "I trust that you will make

the best decisions involving the clan. If you let me decide how to deal with how the bond affects Howie."

I nodded, knowing that in the eyes of Kindred society, I was the one responsible for what Howie did, even though Rafe would be taking a more personal stake in the day-to-day maintenance of our relationship now that Howie was my ghoul.

"I don't want to talk about Howie anymore," I told him as I leaned closer to him again and licked the side of his throat, near his jugular. My body was remembering the sensations that I had felt hours ago and being in Rafe's arms again was bringing those memories to the surface once more.

Rafe grinned devilishly as he lowered his mouth to mine and our lips met in a joining that succeeded in pushing the thoughts and worries concerning my new ghoul out of both our heads. We moved as one to the stairway that led upstairs and when we arrived in the bedroom I symbolically closed the door to the rest of the world so that only Rafe and I existed.

As our clothes were quickly removed, our lips continued to tease each other deliciously. We moved toward the bed as one and I felt dazed as Rafe's hands worked their magic on my body with a familiarity that only he could possess.

All too soon he was poised at my entrance and as I felt him slide deep inside me, Rafe lowered his head until his neck hovered near my mouth. "Feed from me," he offered through clenched teeth as he began to move inside me and I had no control as I felt my fangs lower for the second time that night.

"Yes," I breathed as my teeth sunk gently into his soft flesh and he quickened the pace that he plunged inside me. I fed from him as we made love and as his blood filled my mouth, it also filled my senses with the love he felt for me and the same love that I felt for him. Luckily, I didn't lose track of how much blood I took from him and I felt Rafe explode deep inside me as I pulled my fangs from his neck and licked the wound closed. I followed quickly behind him and lay sated in his arms as the sun rose and with it; I fell into my deep slumber.

Chapter 5 - Plans Within Plans

"Nothing but memories

Of what never was"

Smashing Pumpkins

"Jellybelly"

Since I had forgotten to say anything before the two of them left for their drive the night before, I had asked Rafe to talk to Howie during the day and arrange for him to come to the house that night for the second feeding. As usual, Rafe was in the room when I awakened that night and after a good evening kiss, he informed me that Howie had stayed after business hours and was currently downstairs doing some work in his office. I showered and dressed quickly and drank a blood bag so that I wouldn't be really low after giving both Howie and Rafe vitae of my own. When I was finished, Rafe and I headed to the basement.

Howie was at his desk and he stood as we walked in. We exchanged pleasantries for a few minutes then I suggested that we go back upstairs to the study where the first drink had taken place. Howie had a few questions to ask before we got started and I was more than happy to answer them.

They were basic questions. We had covered a great deal of material the night before so it was only logical that he wouldn't remember it all and I had intended for him to think on what he could remember and ask about it. After all Howie's questions had been answered, I reminded him that he needed to be at the house at the same time the next evening and to wear something appropriate to be presented to the Prince. He nodded, saying that Rafe had already explained to him what would be expected of him.

I stood and asked him and Rafe to come closer so that the second feeding could commence. Since Rafe had been so aroused during the feeding from the night before, I decided to feed both of them from my wrists in the hopes that there wouldn't be a repeat performance tonight. Rafe seemed to be more at ease with the situation but he still kept a watchful eye on his friend as I pushed back the sleeves of my sweater. For his part, Howie was less wide eyed than he had been the previous night. He now knew what to expect and I was pretty sure that he and Rafe had talked more during the day while I had slept.

I wasn't as careful this time about keeping my fangs hidden from Howie as I pierced both my wrists and held them out to the two men. I watched as their two dark heads bent over to receive my blood and I suddenly wondered if the need I felt to protect them was in anyway like the same emotions felt by a mother toward her children. Of course I didn't think of Rafe as my child, he was so much more than that to me, but I knew that I wanted to protect him over my own need for self-preservation and I that was were the similarities came in.

I think that feeding them from my wrists also helped me maintain my composure because while the sensations were essentially doubled what I normally felt when Rafe alone fed from me, I wasn't overwhelmed by them like I had been the night before. Rafe was first to finish this time as well and Howie, who had been watching him throughout the process, stopped soon after.

I watched as Howie turned away from Rafe and me again but it wasn't like it had been the night before. Rafe went to his friend immediately while I licked my wrists closed and spoke to him softly. "Are you alright, buddy?" he asked.

"Yeah. I'm fine, just give me a minute," Howie answered as he walked off the effects of my blood and Rafe stayed with him the entire time. It was hard, but I kept my distance from the two of them because I didn't want Howie to misconstrue any caring gesture that I might give him.

After a minute Howie was okay again but when he turned in my direction I caught something in his gaze that worried me. It was like he was looking at me in a different light and really seeing me for the first time. There was a haunting expression to his dark eyes that frightened me even though it lasted for only a second. I knew that it was the effects of the blood bond settling in and that it was to be expected, but that didn't mean that I had to like it. I glanced at Rafe quickly and saw that he had noticed the exchange, too, but thankfully he didn't comment on it. I made a mental note to talk to him later, after Howie had gone.

I couldn't linger for long because I had an appointment to see my friend, Victoria Monroe, to ask for her help and to be honest I felt the need to remove myself from Howie's presence for a while. Rafe said that he would remain at the house with him so that they could work on developing Howie's gifts that he received with my blood.

"I'll see you later then," I told Rafe as I turned to leave the study so I could grab my coat but he stopped me with a hand on my arm.

"I'll be here when you get back," he said lovingly as he pulled me to his chest for a passionate kiss. His actions surprised me because the kiss was very possessive and demanding, something that we never did in front of others. It was almost as if he was telling Howie not to get any ideas with it and when we broke apart I had to keep myself from looking at Howie to see his reaction.

I spent nearly two hours at Victoria's and when I returned, I found Rafe in his office in the basement; going over a book that I had given him that covered the basics of Thaumaturgy. I had been thinking about beginning to teach him the discipline for a while now and ever since we returned from Detroit, I wanted to make sure he had a better chance of protecting himself. He smiled as I came in and kissed his cheek in greeting.

"Howie and I had a talk," Rafe said as I sat in a chair near his desk and he scooted closer so that he could lay a hand on my knee.

"Oh," I said, hoping that my voice was steady. "How did it go?" I hoped that they didn't get into an argument or anything while I was gone. Killing their friendship had not been my intention when I wanted to ghoulish Howie but I couldn't help fearing that the potential for that happening was quite likely, given the situation.

Rafe took a deep breath then continued. "The bond is affecting him," he admitted as his eyes met mine. "We both knew that it would happen, but I talked to him. I explained that there would be feelings. That he would begin to look at you differently."

"And what did he say?" I asked.

"Howie understands and he is okay with it," Rafe assured me. "We talked everything out and we're both sure nothing bad will come out of it. He understands where the emotions are coming from and what to do with them."

"I'll try to keep myself removed from the situation," I promised as I linked my fingers with his so that both our hands rested on my knee. "Do you mind being responsible for taking care of him?"

Rafe smiled as he squeezed my fingers gently. "Of course not, he's my friend. I know that you are trying to do what's best for all of us, and I think that

things are going a lot better than I thought they would. I won't say that I particularly like knowing what could possibly be running through his head but he knows better than to try anything. I also know that it's hard for you to not have a hand in guiding Howie through all the changes that are going on inside him. You are a caring person by nature but don't worry, I'll take care of him."

We continued to talk for a few minutes about where we should go from here and Rafe had a few questions about the Thaumaturgy book that he was reading. I told him about my visit with Victoria and how she had agreed to help with some testing that I wanted to learn how to do concerning my sister's current predicament.

I had decided to do some research into Christina's amnesia in hopes of finding a way to reverse the affects of the spell that Malcolm had put on her. Victoria knew Biothaumaturgy and because of the conversation that I had with her earlier, she had agreed to teach me if I let her help in return. The ability was new to her and even though she would have done it anyway to help Christina, she wanted the chance to use it herself.

Rafe listened quietly while I told him about what Victoria and I intended to do but deep down, I knew that he didn't really care. Something had happened in Detroit that had drastically changed the way he looked at Christina and now he didn't care whether she ever got her memory back again. I think that part of his newfound dislike for my sister had to do with the fact that the Sabbath had taken him in Detroit and I knew that he still had a great many issues that he hadn't dealt with yet because of that.

I didn't want to push him just yet; the memories were still so fresh in his mind that I couldn't even get him to tell me about everything they had done. So far he hadn't made too much of a scene regarding the fact that I still wanted to be involved with Christina so I bided my time until I thought it would be okay to talk to him.

"I know you'll take care of him," I said as I slipped my hand behind his neck and buried my fingers in his long, dark hair. "Everything is going to turn out okay." I leaned forward and kissed him lightly on the lips then stood. "I'm going to give Antonio a call and catch him up on what's going on here."

"Okay," Rafe said as he settled back in his chair and picked up the book again. "When you're done I have a few more questions on this."

"No problem." I grabbed his phone off the desk and punched in the numbers that would connect me to my sire's cell phone. As far as I knew he was still in Las Vegas but one never knew when they would be called somewhere on clan business. Antonio usually told me if he was going to be out of town but I always called his cell phone just in case.

He answered almost immediately. "One just isn't enough, it is my dear?" he teased from the other end after I told him about Howie. "For either of my childer."

"I refuse to comment," I told him stiffly, even though I knew he was just teasing me. Christina was still a sore subject for me but Antonio had no way of knowing about it. It was something that I had a hard time admitting to myself. Deep down I knew that she was still my sister and I hoped that one day she would be a part of my life again. But it was hard to forget the way she had turned from everyone who had wanted only to help her.

"Are you competing?" Antonio continued to taunt. "First it was you who took on a ghou and then Christina followed. Now, she has two and you have taken on a second."

"Yeah," I replied, allowed my full sarcasm to come through even though Antonio would have every right to put me back in my place. "I'm also hoping to one day wake up in the middle of a street and not remember who I am."

"Now, now," he soothed, realizing that his comments were hurting my feelings. "That wasn't her fault."

"I have to protect what's mine, sire," I told him, hoping that he understood that there wasn't a silent competition between my sister and I. That I had ghouled Howie for the reasons I had given him and that was it.

"I understand, my dear, really I do," he assured me. I could almost feel him patting me gently on the back over the miles as he tried to atone for his teasing. He then asked if I was doing everything as tradition demanded concerning Howie and I assured him that I was, even though Rafe didn't like the fact that Howie was drinking from me to begin with.

After living for over five hundred years as a vampire, Antonio had a hard time dealing with mortals, so his next statement didn't really surprise me when he said it. "He will get over it," he commented seriously and I didn't have the heart or the time it would take to try to explain to him again that how Rafe felt mattered to me.

We chatted for a few more minutes and he told me that I should take advantage of whatever Victoria had to teach me and to remember that she was an elder and that she deserved my respect. I assured him that I knew my place and that I intended to learn all that I could from anyone who was willing to teach me.

I was glad that he couldn't see my face because he probably could have read something in what I wasn't saying. I hadn't told him about the extra studying or supernatural contacts I had been making since returning from Detroit. No one knew about what I was planning and I wanted to keep it that way. The only person that I would confide it was Rafe and that I hadn't done yet. I didn't think the clan would understand the burning desire that had taken up residence in my gut to stop Malcolm Robbins from ever hurting anyone else. I couldn't kill him but there had to be a way to contain him once and for all.

I also wouldn't be responsible for an entire Tradition losing their magic. That was why I was talking to other mages and doing whatever reading I could get my hands on in an effort to find a way to capture Malcolm in some way so that he continued to live and with that so would the Verbena magic.

I spent the rest of the night with Rafe, both of us studying our respective subjects and every so often he would ask a question that I would answer. I shared with him interesting facts that I found concerning amnesia and in no time we found ourselves discussing either how they could affect Christina or different angles we could approach those facts when it came to Thaumaturgy. Rafe was quickly showing a great aptitude for the discipline and he managed to point out some avenues that I hadn't thought of before.

Later, as we were lying in bed together just before dawn, I suggested to Rafe that if there was time during the day he should take Howie on a tour of the places in the house where he hadn't been allowed to go before, like the dungeon and the secret passageway to the garage.

"It's time," I murmured as I felt sleep beginning to pull me under. The sun was coming up and within moments I was lost in my daylight dreams but I still managed to feel Rafe's warm lips on my forehead as I drifted off.

Chapter 6 - Be Careful What You Wish For

"Our two shadows merge inseparably"

Jewel

"What's Simple is True"

The next evening Howie arrived soon after dark, dressed in a perfectly tailored black suit with a charcoal grey shirt. We made a well-matched trio in black, since Rafe's suit and my cocktail dress were the same color and I wished for a brief moment that Chris were here to document the moment with the camera she always had on hand for special occasions.

Rafe and Howie made a big deal of straightening each other's ties and telling each other how well they cleaned up when they wanted to. I smiled as I watched them, knowing that this situation had been the best for everyone involved and I realized for the first time how relaxed Rafe had been since Howie had agreed to become my ghoul. I attributed it to the fact that he didn't have to hide anything from his friend any longer and that part of his burden had been lifted from his shoulders now that Howie knew the truth.

The third feeding took place in the study again since it was such familiar territory for everyone. Like the night before, I fed both of them from my wrists as we all stood near the couch. As Rafe and Howie took my blood into themselves, I once again looked down at their bent heads in wonder. This man who held my heart like only one before him ever had, and the other, his friend that I couldn't allow to go through life unprotected because I cared for his well being just as much as my own. Both sustained by the gifts that my blood had to offer.

I was responsible for them. I was the one who cared whether they lived or died, whether they rose to glory in this life or lived a mundane existence, as they chose. I was the one who would grieve after they were gone from this existence, and it would be I alone who would be as responsible for their deaths, as I would be if they lived a thousand years. They were mine. Mine forever.

I felt my eyes glaze over as thoughts of what they were capable of flashed through my mind in a frenzy of activity. And as these thoughts ran through my minds eye, I felt pairs of lips on other parts of my body, rather than just my wrists. Ghost lips that kissed and nipped at my skin and sent delicious shivers down my spine as I felt a fire of excitement building in my abdomen. Lips were replaced by the hands of the men that would do anything to please me, to make me happy. I heard Rafe moan quietly in the back of his throat like I had so many times during our time together and I silently urged him to pull all of us to the floor and finish this exercise of pleasure and desire.

I didn't know when I finally realized that what I was feeling had more to do with the sensations of the feeding rather than how I actually felt about either of them. Most of the underlying concern for Rafe and Howie were real, but the visions of grandeur and their adulation toward me was like a slap in the face that brought me back to my senses lightening fast. My first instinct was to pull away from them for my own preservation, to just get the hell away. Thankfully, I realized that by doing that I would only alert Rafe to a problem and he was the last person I wanted to know that I had been affected that way.

I was just happy to know that this would be the last feeding of this type. I was embarrassed by how my mind had ran in crazy circles as I rationally reassured

myself that I wasn't attracted to Howie in anyway. He was my husband's friend and my new ghoul. I knew that it was the feeding that was affecting me, causing my mind to create fantasies because my body was in the throes of feeding passion.

They were finishing now and as they lifted their heads within seconds of one another, my head stopped spinning with the crazy thoughts that had threatened to take control as they had fed. Somehow, I managed to stay on my feet as I licked the wounds on my skin closed but I didn't dare to meet either of them in the eye. Especially Rafe.

Howie seemed to be doing okay. He didn't turn away from us like he had in the previous feedings and I think that he was managing to adjust nicely. There wasn't any outward indication that he was looking at me any differently than the night before but it wasn't like I was really paying too much attention to him, either.

I excused myself for a moment, claiming that I needed to collect the jacket I had forgotten upstairs so that I could have time to pull myself together. The last thing I wanted to do right then was go to the Chantry but the Prince was waiting for me to present Howie and I couldn't linger for much longer. I went to the bathroom where I could stare into the mirror at myself and after a few minutes alone, I was okay, putting the eeriness of what had happened downstairs behind me as I grabbed the jacket I and returned downstairs.

Since my car wouldn't hold three people, we all piled in Rafe's car and headed for the Chantry. I needed something to occupy my mind so, on the way I took over the lessons that Rafe had been teaching Howie in Auspex. It was an odd place to conduct a series of heightened senses exercises but somehow we managed and Howie impressed me by how much he had learned from Rafe in a few days time.

We pulled into the Chantry fifteen minutes later. Howie was greatly impressed with the mansion and a little surprised when he found out that it was the Chantry.

"Brian drives by here all the time," he commented as Rafe pulled the car into a vacant spot. "He always wondered who built this place."

"Elvira had the limestone brought all the way from Ireland," I told him when we were out of the vehicle and approaching the front door. "She wanted to make sure the house could withstand the test of time like the other Chantries in Europe."

Within minutes we were standing before Elvira and Ford Radek, the Regent of the Ambika Eostar Chantry. I introduced Howie to them both and I smiled as I watched Howie step forward gracefully to bow before the Prince as he kissed her hand just as Rafe had instructed him. Elvira seemed to eye Howie appreciatively, like she normally did with any good looking man, but her attention returned to her newest plaything, Cormac's child, James Price, quickly enough when he appeared at her side.

"Welcome to the Tremere house, Mr. Dorrough," she said in her best authoritative voice. "I'm sure that Brenda has instructed you on what is expected of you in your new role but let me give you the basics on what will be expected of you here in the Chantry." She then quickly outlined that there were places in the Chantry that he would only be allowed to go if he were accompanied by a member of the clan. These were places of high security to the clan and no ghoul, regardless of how long they had been one, was allowed to trespass in these areas alone. These rules were as basic as the Masquerade and all ghouls understood them.

Howie listened attentively while Elvira spoke, even when she told him in no certain terms that if he were caught breaking any of these rules he would be killed

on the spot. When she was finished, he bowed again as he said respectfully, "Yes, my Prince."

He had done very well during the presentation but now was the real test. Most of the other members of the clan were there as well and they were all eager to welcome Howie into the Tremere fold and to get a chance to see what kind of a person he was. For the most part I trusted most of the members of my clan in the city but there were still a few members from the previous prince, Beth Bathori's, lineage left that I didn't think any one would ever be totally sure of their loyalty. Luckily none of them were here tonight but I was sure that Rafe had already filled Howie in on who to trust and who to be leery of. Rafe had already gone over who was who with Howie and he had always been a good judge of character so I wasn't worried that he would divulge any secrets that he shouldn't have.

Later, when everyone was mingling about like they were at a cocktail party, I had a chance to speak with Mickey about what would be expected of Howie at the Chantry. Mickey informed me that Howie would be required to put in between fifteen and twenty hours a week at the Chantry with the other security ghouls, and if it were okay, he wanted to know if Rafe would also work there for ten to fifteen hours a week. I agreed, knowing that if Rafe were there Howie would be more comfortable.

We stayed at the Chantry for a few hours. I didn't want to hang out there for very long because there was a great deal of reading that I wanted to get done but I knew that Howie needed to spend time with my clan members so that he could get to know them.

I allowed Howie a few days to continue to adjust to his new existence before I brought up the subject of feeding from him. To be honest I was a little worried about how he would react to the feeding and with the memories of the last time he and Rafe had fed from me still fresh in my head, I wanted to give myself as much time as I dared before I fed from him for my own sake.

I also needed the time to help Victoria set up a lab area in the Chantry and to insure that we had everything we needed to begin our work on the blood of my sister's sire. Victoria had gone out of town on Thursday and would be absent for a few days so I took the opportunity to do more reading while I finished setting up the lab. We were still waiting for the information to come in from the study of Dougall's blood while he lived in Los Angeles but there was plenty to do to make sure we could proceed once we had that information.

I also used this time to perform the ritual on Rafe that I had asked permission from Elvira to do. It was called Belated Curse and was a ritual designed for use on trusted ghouls so that if something was to happen to them and they were to die, they would come back as Kindred. I was fine with the knowledge that Rafe wasn't ready to become Kindred but he was still vulnerable and I wanted to do this to protect him in the future.

During those few days a new habit was beginning to form between the three of us. Rafe continued to study the beginnings of Thaumaturgy and he had many questions that sometimes required lengthy explanations. Howie would go home for a few hours after the office day at the agency was over but he was back soon after sundown to continue his own studies.

Friday marked the first session when Howie and Rafe spent time at the Chantry helping out with security. Rafe informed me afterward that Howie was a little overwhelmed at first as he learned more and more about the clan and its inner workings but Rafe was sure that he would be okay. He sounded like an older

brother who was letting Howie hang out with his friends and the image was a reassuring one. Things seemed to be settling down to a nice routine and I felt a great deal better.

When I rose on Saturday night I knew it was time. I took great care when I dressed for the evening because I was going for the drab look. I knew that the feeding would be really intense for Howie and I wanted to make sure that I looked as ugly as possible in an effort to take away from the pleasure that I knew he would be feeling and hopefully make the experience a little less intimate. I pulled on old jeans and a baggy UNLV sweatshirt that had somehow survived my college years and I secured my hair back in a ponytail.

Rafe seemed to know what I was thinking about doing as soon as he saw me come out of the bathroom. "Did Howie say if he was coming back tonight?" I asked as I crossed to the bed and pulled the satin sheets and comforter until they were once again smooth and the pillows back in place.

"He was going home to catch a couple hours sleep and then come back here around nine," Rafe replied. He was silent for about thirty seconds as I tidied up the room then he spoke again. "You're going to feed from him tonight, aren't you?"

His statement wasn't really a question and it was hard for me to determine what he was thinking at the moment. "It's time," I told him casually as I straightened and pulled two locks of my hair to tighten my ponytail on the back of my head as I faced my husband. "Do you think that he's ready?"

Rafe shrugged. "He asked when you were going to do it and I was going to bring it up tonight," he confessed.

"Is he ready?" I asked again. God knew I wasn't but my needs didn't matter right now. This was my responsibility and only I could do it.

"As ready as he'll ever be," Rafe said as he came forward and put his hands on my upper arms. "What about you?"

"I'm okay," I said, maybe a little too quickly but I met his gaze steadily and that seemed to be enough for him.

"I'll call him to make sure that he's coming over," Rafe promised before he kissed my forehead.

We went downstairs then and spent some quality time together while we waited for Howie to arrive. Both of us had been focusing a great deal of time on my new ghoul lately and I missed just being able to *talk* with my husband. He told me that he spent part of the day with his friends, watching a football game at Samantha and AJ's house; then the guys took Brendan outside to play so his mother could have a chance to study.

I felt like I was there as Rafe described how they had played a mock game of football with the year old child. AJ was the perfect father, pretending that Brendan had tackled him like a professional player, as he fell to the ground and grunted appropriately as his son landed on his chest.

For not the first time, I found myself wishing that I could participate in these family activities myself. But my dice had already been cast and that kind of normal life wasn't possible for me anymore. These thoughts ultimately made me think once again of my other self that was married to Michael in another dimension and of their two children. I tried to hide my sadness as Rafe told me about his day but I knew that I hadn't done an effective enough job when he pulled me against his chest and held me tight.

"Don't cry, baby," he cooed as I tried to wipe my eyes before I got blood tears all over him. "It's okay." It felt good to have his hands rub my back soothingly and to have his lips brush my temple.

"I'm sorry," I sniffed. There wasn't anything that either of us could say. I couldn't help but think again how I had robbed Rafe of a normal life but I didn't voice my opinion to him. We had already had this conversation many times before and I loved Rafe so much that I knew there was no way I could let him go. I once again pushed the thoughts of what could never be to the back of my mind as I pulled away from him and wiped my eyes one last time. I didn't want to spoil our private time together by crying over spilt milk. "How are your studies going?" I asked, changing the subject.

Rafe had come across the ritual where a vampire could 'store' their blood in objects like beads or anything small enough to carry on their person and he wanted to know how it worked. It was a lengthy ritual to perform but an important one and I could always use an extra stored amount of blood in case of emergency so I did it to show him how it worked.

Howie showed up around nine as expected. About a half an hour before he was due to arrive, Rafe and I went down to the kitchen and put together some snacks and orange juice to have on hand for Howie after I'd fed from him. I didn't know if he might get woozy afterward and I wanted to make sure he had something on hand to counteract any effects.

Chapter 7 - The Final Step

*"I know the truth is in
Between the 1st and the 40th drink."*

*Tori Amos
"Concertina"*

We talked for a few minutes and I answered some questions that he had about the Auspex abilities that he was continuing to work on. Finally I broached the reason why he was here tonight. "Rafe told you why I asked you to come over tonight?" I asked.

"He did," he replied with a nervous smile.

I smiled back at him reassuringly. "Don't worry. Everything is going to be fine. Are you ready to begin?"

Howie nodded his head resolutely. "I'm ready."

Rafe and I had been sitting on the couch together and Howie had taken his customary chair across from us. I stood and so did he and I stepped to the side and indicated for him to come have a seat next to Rafe, who had turned himself so that he could support Howie during the feeding.

"Pull back your sleeve," I instructed as I settled on the cushion sideways in front of him. He did as I asked and when he was done I took his hand in mine and examined the soft flesh of his wrist. "This will not hurt," I told him in a calm voice as I looked up and met his gaze.

Howie glanced over his shoulder nervously at Rafe, who in turn nodded reassuringly and smiled.

"There will be a small prick when I first insert my fangs, but after that it will all be okay," I explained as I gently rubbed my thumb over the flesh I was about to bite into. "Are you ready?"

Howie took a deep breath to steady himself then nodded. "I'm ready," he replied in a near whisper.

I lowered my fangs and looked at Howie for any sign of repulsion. When I saw that his dark eyes were clear of everything but amazement and he studied my every movement, I lifted his wrist to my mouth as my gaze lifted to Rafe's emerald eyes as they watched over his friend. Slowly I allowed my teeth to sink into Howie's olive skin.

Howie gasped as my teeth sunk into his flesh, and I watched as his eyes closed with pleasure. His free hand grasped onto the couch cushion until his knuckles were white, but it was obvious that he wasn't in pain. He was clearly enjoying the experience he found himself in, but he was doing his best to keep his emotions under control. My heart sank as the contours of his face softened one moment in ecstasy then harden again as he tried not to feel the incredible sensations that were sweeping over him.

Rafe laid a hand on his shoulder, and that seemed to help, giving Howie something else to try to think about. Knowing that I needed to allow him the full feeding experience, I took a pint of blood from him and when I withdrew my fangs, he drew in a deep shuddering breath that left no doubt he had enjoyed the encounter.

I licked the wound closed and carefully placed Howie's hand in his lap. I regarded him for a moment then spoke in a low, calm voice. "The first time is always the most intense," I said as my eyes met Rafe's. "Are you dizzy? Sick?"

"No, I'm fine," Howie replied quickly. "Just give me a minute." He sounded a little breathless and his eyes were still closed as he took a series of deep breaths.

I reached for a glass tumbler on the table and poured some of the orange juice into it. Rafe reached out and took the glass from my hand before I could give it to Howie and when my gaze met his, I understood from the look in his eyes that I needed to keep my distance for the moment so I sat back to watch.

Rafe touched Howie's arm again and after a minute the other man opened his eyes and Rafe handed him the glass. Howie was surprisingly stable for someone who'd just been fed from, but he took the glass with a steady hand and took a big drink before setting it back down and standing. He then walked across the room until he stood behind the couch. "I have to say that wasn't what I expected," he said after a minute.

Rafe was watching him closely, and Howie seemed to be taking great pains to hide any reaction he might be having after the feeding. "What did you expect?" Rafe asked softly.

Howie turned and shrugged. "A little pain maybe, I don't know."

Since I had once been a ghoul myself, I understood how he felt. I stood and faced Howie as I spoke. "It was necessary that you understand that being fed from can be a good thing," I told him. "When I was a ghoul, my domitor never fed from me so when I took Rafe on, the thought never occurred to me." I looked at Rafe and held out my hand to him and he stood as he took it firmly in his.

I continued to look at Rafe as I went on, "When trouble started in the city last year, I was told that it was a possibility that an enemy vampire would feed from him and that it was important that he know that the kiss wasn't a bad thing. That is the purpose for this exercise tonight. I want to say again that I do not intend to feed from you unless in an emergency but it was still important that you know the kiss can be a good thing."

Howie paled slightly as he looked between Rafe and me. "How bad could it be?"

It was Rafe who responded. "Bad, bro. You don't even wanna know."

It was obvious by the way that Howie was looking questioningly at Rafe that he wanted to ask just how bad it could be, but it was also obvious Rafe didn't want to talk about it. His memories of what had happened in Detroit were still too fresh. "You just have to know that it doesn't have to be bad. Brenda feeds on blood bags most of the time, but if the supply runs out, we have to feed her."

"That hasn't happen yet," I was quick to assure him. "A supply is brought to the house as often as I need it."

I knew that my explanation wasn't doing anything to answer the questions Howie had about what happened to Rafe in Detroit but even I didn't have the entire story and I was dealing with that for now. It would have to be enough for him that he didn't have to worry about how he would be treated by me as his domitor and those others things he could learn in time.

Things seemed to settle a little after that and the three of us decided to hang around the house for the rest of the night and watch a movie. There were many times during the rest of the evening that I noticed Howie's eyes on me, watching me as we sat together companionably in front of the television. I knew that we weren't out of the dark with what could come out of this blood bond. Howie was okay with things for now but that could change in a heartbeat and even though I

was trying to keep up a brave front for Rafe's sake, there was no way for me to know in the end how things would go down.

I don't know if Rafe ever saw the lingering glances that Howie gave me, but I did my best to ignore them. I figured that for right now what I had to concentrate on was to continue to treat Howie like a friend and be his domitor. Nothing more. There were many things that he still had to learn, like how to heal and how to manipulate his blood to enhance his strength and stamina. Aside from the supernatural matters, there were other things like advanced weapon skills and strategy that he would benefit in learning, just in case the Sabbat decided to come back again.

There were a lot of things that I had to do in the next few weeks, Howie's lessons being among the most important. I could only hope that things turned out for the best in the end but I was completely committed to doing whatever I had to do to ensure those that I held dear were safe. I wasn't going to get caught with my pants down again.

But you know what they always say...be careful what you wish for...