



Samantha: Awakening

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BECOMING

ANGELUS: NOW THAT'S EVERYTHING, HUH? NO WEAPONS, NO FRIENDS, NO HOPE. TAKE ALL THAT AWAY AND WHAT'S LEFT?

BUFFY: ME.

On Friday evenings, I volunteer at Mother Abigail's, a half way house for teen girls in trouble. I help Rachael Black, one of my best friends, teach the girls about Wicca, and magic. This being Salem, Massachusetts, no one seems to mind.

Most Friday's are pretty calm, but one Friday something happened. I don't know what exactly, because I can't seem to remember the details. The voice in my head tells me I don't want to remember them, so I don't bother to try.

One thing that I do remember is that men who hurt us invaded the house, and that they had buried me for dead in the dirt beneath the garage. I remember this only because that's when the voice started talking to me.

He told me to play dead, like I used to as a child. I'd scare Rafe, my older brother, with that trick until he realized what I was doing. I concentrated, and soon I felt my heartbeat slow, nearly stop. My breathing was nonexistent. I knew from past experience that I could stay in this state for hours.

It would have been nearly impossible for anyone to feel my heart beat, and the guy who had dragged me into the hole was in a hurry, so he missed it. Someone poured something vile into my mouth, and they buried me in the cold ground.

The voice cautioned me not to swallow what was in my mouth, so I didn't. It talked to me quietly while I drifted somewhere near consciousness. I remember waking up to my brother slapping me, begging me to stop playing and come back to him. When I took a deep breath and opened my eyes, I saw tears on his face.

"Rafe?" I whispered softly.

"Samantha," he said gratefully, gathering me into his arms and holding me tight. "Christ, you scared the hell out of me."

His girlfriend Brenda Thompson was there too, and she was also very relieved that I was okay. I spent a little time talking to a very nice older gentleman, and then they made sure I was going to be all right before they let me go home.

As I lay in bed waiting for sleep to overtake me, I heard the voice again. *You know they changed your memories*, he told me.

"I know," I whispered into the darkness.

It's for the best, really, he replied softly. *You don't want to remember what happened.*

"Okay." I thought I must have been going crazy if I was talking to the voices in my head.

I'm not just a voice in your head, he said. *I'm a part of you, I always have been.*

"Since when?" I asked. "I don't remember hearing you before."

Since your first life, he assured me. *My soul is bound to yours. I am your Avatar.*

I had heard of Avatars. They were spirits that were joined with true mages and helped them perform real magic. Rachael was a true mage, but she'd told me that her Avatar was weak.

I am not weak, he told me. *We have a strong bond, you and I. We always have, in every life you've ever lived.*

"I'm a mage?" I asked, awestruck.

You are, he replied. Your power will come back to you in time. I'll show you.

"What's your name?"

I am Min, defender of Zenos, he said proudly.

"Zenos?"

It is a city long dead, Min murmured sadly. But I defended it, and died doing so. Since that time, we have been bound together.

I thought about what Min was saying, and asked, "Will you always be with me?"

I will be close, he said. When you need me, I'll be here.

Good, I thought, closing my eyes. I felt sleep coming on and let it take me, secure in the knowledge that I would never truly be alone again.

THE WISH

ANYANKA: YOU TRUSTING FOOL! HOW DO YOU KNOW THE OTHER WORLD IS ANY BETTER THAN THIS?

GILES: BECAUSE IT HAS TO BE.

The next day I went to work at the bookstore downtown as usual. My cousin Brian managed the place, and he asked if I would stay after my shift. Rafe and Brenda were supposed to come in, and he planned to surprise them with friends of my brother who had just gotten into town from New York. I didn't want to at first, but I hadn't spent much time with Rafe since he'd come home so in the end I let him talk me into it.

Rafe and Brian had gone to college with Howie and AJ in New York. I had met Howie when he had come home from college with Rafe for the holidays one year. Howie worked at one of the big publishing houses in New York, but not the same one that, until recently, Rafe had worked at.

I'd heard all about AJ, of course, the world famous writer of horror stories. Out of curiosity I'd picked up one of his novels and to my surprise I had loved it. He had a way of making my skin crawl just reading his work. Now I owned everything he'd ever published.

Rafe had mentioned Nick in passing a few times, and I'd been able to piece together that they'd had some sort of relationship. When Nick's father, who just happened to own the publishing house Rafe worked for, found out about their liaison, he fired my brother and made sure that no other publisher in New York would hire him. That was the reason Rafe had moved back to Salem in the first place, but then he'd met Brenda.

Brenda was good for my brother in more ways than one. Although they'd only known each other for a short time, I could tell that they already cared deeply for each other. I liked Brenda, and not just because the entire coven thought she was the goddess incarnate. I'd thought she was too for a while, but then I'd realized that while she did have some really cool powers, she wasn't a goddess. I actually wasn't sure exactly what she was, but I knew that she cared for Rafe, and that was all that mattered to me.

After I punched out, I went to the café area of the bookstore and sat with Brian and his friends, but I felt really uncomfortable. After all, I didn't really know any of them except my cousin, and it wasn't every day I spent time with a famous author. That was another reason I'd agreed to join them, I wanted to know more about this guy who could scare the hell out of the whole world.

I kept quiet while we were waiting for Rafe and Brenda, watching the men from beneath my lashes and trying to find out what kind of man AJ was. What I saw surprised me. He seemed kind and gentle, yet fun loving and boisterous at the same time.

I tried to watch Nick as well to see exactly what had attracted Rafe to him. I didn't understand that side of my brother, but I tried very hard not to judge him for it either. He had to live the way that suited him best and not worry about pleasing anyone else.

When Rafe and Brenda came in, I saw the surprise and pleasure on his face. He almost missed a step when he saw Nick, but I think all in all he was happy to see his friends. Brenda seemed surprised as well, and paid Nick particular interest while trying not to look like she was.

I was surprised myself when Rafe introduced Brenda as his fiancée. I'd known it was coming, but really hadn't expected it quite so soon. I hugged Brenda and congratulated them both knowing that I'd never have to worry about my brother's happiness again.

Brenda had a way of making me feel at ease, even in the company of these strangers. She made sure everyone stayed involved in conversation, and kept the flow of talk going when it lagged. I actually had a good time, which I had not expected.

Rafe seemed a little uncomfortable, though. He was sitting between Nick and Brenda, but almost clutching at Brenda's hand. After Brenda and I returned from a trip to the ladies room, Rafe seemed in a hurry to leave.

I was sorry to see them go because I didn't spend as much time with my brother as I would have liked to. He'd spent the last nine years living in New York and until he'd moved back here I hadn't really seen that much of him. I hid a sigh, knowing that Rafe had his own life to live, and it wasn't fair for me to expect him to drop everything for a sister he barely knew.

Pulling Brian aside, I made my excuses. As I reached the door, I felt the weight of someone's gaze on me, and I turned to look back. AJ was watching me, and when he saw me turn, he smiled. Taken aback, I returned his smile and turned to go.

He likes you, Min told me.

I wish, I replied fiercely as I walked across the parking lot to my car. *He couldn't possibly be the least bit interested in me. Have you seen the way I look?*

Yes, the avatar said, amused. *You just need to fix your hair, get some new clothes, and you'll be beautiful.*

When I reached my car, I glanced over the hood to see that AJ was still watching me through the window. I looked away and got inside of my car quickly. *I have a boyfriend,* I told the pest inside my head.

You call that a boyfriend? he replied. *I call it a loser.*

I couldn't argue with that, because I was becoming to believe it myself. Simon was... different. He was okay most of the time, but he didn't really think that the rules applied to him, any rules. That was part of what had drawn me to him in the first place; I always followed the rules, well almost always.

Just lately, though, he'd been scaring me by just how much he didn't play by the rules. He seemed harder the last few weeks, almost uncaring about everything. And sometimes... well, he'd never been the most polite person in the world, but lately he'd done some things that I didn't know how to handle, or stop from happening again.

We didn't really spend a lot of time together, especially lately. Simon liked to hang out with his friends, and I had college and work to go to. We'd been dating for three years, since I was a senior in high school. He was the first boy I ever went on a date with, the first boy I ever kissed, the first boy I.... Well, you get the idea.

Our relationship had been a comfortable one, until recently. He didn't have to worry about having a girlfriend, and I had an excuse not to look at other guys. I mean, really, who would have looked at me anyway if not Simon?

It wasn't as if I was pretty or anything. My hair is long with a natural wave that makes it almost impossible to manage. My eyes are blue, too common to stand out in a crowd. My face is plain, lacking any prominent features at all. I don't have large breasts or long legs or anything else that men normally want in a woman.

I shrugged to myself as I pulled into my driveway. I didn't know why AJ had been watching me and it didn't really matter. Daydreaming of any kind of relationship with him would be like wishing I was a princess trapped in a castle waiting for my prince to come and save me.

Interesting comparison, Min murmured.

Drop it, I ordered him as I unlocked the door. Why don't you show me how to do things instead of bugging me about some guy? The possibility of him being interested in me is about as likely as me living to a hundred and fifty.

You know, he replied thoughtfully, you're absolutely right. We need to find you a focus. A focus? I asked, intrigued.

Something that will help you to focus your energy until you learn to control it, he explained.

I suggested several items that Min dismissed out of hand. Then I took out an old necklace that had once been my mother's. He seemed to think it was perfect, and he started trying to teach me how to move things with my mind. It was exhausting work and I couldn't seem to get it right.

After Min finally gave up, I spent the rest of the evening reading passages from occult books that Min had me pull off the shelf. Some I'd read before, but Min was able to shed new light on even those. He assured me that in time I'd be able to do things that now I couldn't even imagine.

THE HARSH LIGHT OF DAY

HARMONY: I DON'T KNOW WHY I LET YOU BE SO MEAN TO ME.

SPIKE: LOVE HURTS BABY.

The next day, Rafe stopped by to see how I was feeling. Since I felt fine, that's what I told him. We were sitting at the breakfast bar in the kitchen drinking sodas.

"No ill effects?" he asked, concerned. It had only been a few days since the incident at Mother Abigail's.

"I feel great, Rafe," I assured him. I wasn't about to tell him about my hyper enhanced senses. I felt like I had half a dozen more senses than I had the day before.

He looked me over once more and nodded to himself, then smiled. "Okay, no more big brother talk," he told me. "Hey, we're all going to Elissa's for dinner tonight, you want to go with?"

"Who's we?" I asked, warily.

"The guys and Brenda," he replied. "Nick went home this afternoon, but Howie and AJ will be there. I know Bren will want to make sure you're all right, too. Want to come?"

"I'm supposed to have dinner with Simon tonight," I said, trying to sound disappointed. I knew I didn't fit in with Rafe's friends, and as much as I liked Brenda, I didn't want to sit around feeling like a fifth wheel. Also, I really did have a date with Simon.

"Well, I guess you could bring him," Rafe said hesitantly.

I sighed. "Why don't you like Simon?"

He shot me a measuring look. "He's nice enough, I guess," he replied reluctantly. "I just think you could do better."

Always the big brother. "Isn't it enough that I like him?"

"Do you?" he asked pointedly. "Or do you just stay with him because you think you can't get anyone else?"

While I dismissed Rafe's statement and was able to turn him to other subjects, I kept hearing it in my mind. Did I only stay with Simon because I was afraid to be alone? Because I didn't think anyone else would want me? Deep down I knew that Rafe was probably right.

Actually, the point was driven home to me that evening when I sat beside Simon in Elissa's eating dinner listening to Rafe and his friends discuss the occult. I was listening, anyway; Simon was attacking everything anyone had to say on the subject. I bit my lip until it bled to stop from screaming at him right there at the table.

When Brenda excused herself, I knew I had to stop his flow of venom. I closed my eyes and tried once more to concentrate like Min had told me. The copper taste of blood was strong in my mouth. A moment later, I heard Simon yelp in surprise. His beer glass had tipped, spilling the liquid across the table and into his lap.

"Shit," Simon exclaimed, blotting at the spot with his napkin.

Excellent, Min told me. You're learning fast.

I quickly reached over and picked up the glass to set it upright. "What happened?" I asked softly, as if I had no idea.

"I went to grab the glass and the damn thing spilled," he said, disgusted.

"Maybe you should try to dry that some in the bathroom," I suggested.

"Yeah," he agreed, standing. After shooting one last spiteful look at AJ, he stalked to the men's room.

I breathed a silent sigh of relief at his leaving and turned to AJ. "I'm sorry," I told him apologetically. "Simon doesn't know that much about the occult, he shouldn't have been so rude."

"It's easy for people to dislike things they don't understand," AJ assured me. "That's why so many healers were burned as witches during the burning times."

"Not to mention those that were hung, or drowned," I reminded him.

The subject was a favorite of mine, and so engrossing that for several minutes I forgot about Simon and my natural shyness enough to actively participated in the conversation. Brenda returned in the middle of the discussion and began to give me speculative looks. By the time the topic had changed, AJ was looking at me with a new respect in his eyes.

"You know, you should come to the house with AJ tomorrow," Brenda suggested. "He could pick you up and we could talk about this whole thing in a more quiet setting."

"No, I—" I began, but AJ was already talking.

"That would be great," he said excitedly. "I've been having problems researching Salem's history, and you seem to know the topic quite thoroughly."

"Well, I—"

"Wonderful," Brenda exclaimed. "He can pick you up around six thirty and you both can be at the house by seven."

"I could drive," I suggested quietly, knowing it would do no good to protest further about going.

"Nonsense," she replied, refusing to hear the reluctance in my voice. "It won't be any trouble, will it AJ?"

"None at all," he told her firmly.

Brian called a question down the table to Rafe, and that quickly it was settled. I felt like I'd been run over by a freight train. I didn't even glance up when Simon returned from the bathroom, a damp spot still evident on the front of his pants.

He was doing his best to hide his irritation, doing the perfect imitation of a harmless fool. He did it so well that even I almost believed it, and would have if not for the bruising grip he had on my hand.

Soon everyone was done eating and it was time to go. We walked out to the parking lot in a group, and as we approached the cars, I managed to pull Brenda aside.

"Brenda, I can't ride with AJ," I told her in an urgent whisper.

"Why not?" she asked.

"Because I can't," I replied, feeling like a fool. "He makes me uncomfortable." I didn't want to mention how pissed Simon would be if I rode somewhere with another man. He'd been very possessive lately.

"Does he do something you don't like?"

That was exactly the problem, I liked him too much. "No," I said aloud, "it's not like that, he just.... I don't know, I don't feel comfortable with him."

She glanced over at the guys still standing by one of the cars. "Are you afraid of him, Samantha?" she queried softly.

You are, you know, Min responded.

"Of course I'm not afraid of him," I denied fervently. *I'm just afraid of the way he makes me feel,* I told Min silently.

"Then there's no problem," Brenda replied. "He can pick you up and bring you over tomorrow night." She turned away from my objections and walked toward the others.

I sighed and dug at the asphalt with the toe of my shoe. Short of admitting the real reasons I didn't want to be with AJ, I was stuck with spending tomorrow evening with the three of them. After another deep sigh, I rejoined Simon and we said our good-byes.

When Simon pulled away from Elissa's I could tell by the way he was driving that he was very angry. I sat back and waited for him to break the silence. It didn't take him long.

"What the fuck is that bitch trying to do?" he demanded harshly.

"I don't know what you mean," I replied softly.

"You know," he insisted with a hostile glance my way. "Why is she trying to set you up with that writer guy?" The way he said 'writer' made it sound like something dirty.

"She's not trying to set me up with him," I answered patiently. But not too patiently, that would have set him off for sure. I didn't understand why he'd been so irritable in the last few weeks, but I'd quickly learned to adjust my behavior to compensate. "He's writing a book based in Salem—"

"I was there," he snarled impatiently. "I know what he's doing, I just don't see what it has to do with you."

"I know a lot about Salem's history," I reminded him, "and the occult. He is a horror writer, Brenda thinks I can help him with his research."

He turned a corner too fast and I clutched at the door handle to keep my balance. "Like you could," he said derisively. "He's a big shot writer, he knows more about all that stuff than you do."

Why do you put up with this guy? Min asked.

Why indeed? "Look, Simon," I replied pleadingly. "Brenda's going to be my sister-in-law, I'm just doing this for her. When AJ sees that I can't help him, she'll stop trying to make me. I don't like this any better than you do." That part at least was true. From the conversation I'd had with AJ this evening, I thought that it was quite possible I could help him with his research. I wouldn't tell that to Simon, though, it was best not to disagree with him when he was like this.

He sped through the dark streets of Salem, ranting the entire time about Brenda and AJ. I listened with half an ear and responded when it seemed appropriate. When he pulled into my drive, he didn't even put the car in park.

"You're not coming in?" I said timidly, hoping he wouldn't.

"Not tonight, babe," he barked. "I'm still pissed about this whole thing and I need to cool off. I'll call you tomorrow." He never even looked at me when I got out of the car.

I stood in the grass and watched him pull away, feeling extremely relieved that he was gone.

He's a loser, Min told me.

He's my loser, I reminded him sadly. *The only loser I've got.* My eyes followed his taillights until they were out of site, then I turned and let myself into the dark, empty house.

SOME ASSEMBLY REQUIRED

WILLOW: LOVE MAKES YOU DO THE WACKY.

BUFFY: THAT'S THE TRUTH.

I stayed close to the house the next day, waiting impatiently for AJ to call. I did some cleaning and my laundry, then went out into the yard and industriously pulled a few weeds. Of course, some things I'd thought were weeds, Min advised me not to pull. He said they were herbs and that he would show me how to use them. After taking a shower and eating a solitary dinner, AJ finally called.

"Samantha," he said softly, "I know Brenda suggested I call for directions, but I got them from Brian."

"Oh," I replied. Then why was he calling?

"I just wanted to let you know that I'll be there around six forty to pick you up," he explained.

I smiled to myself. "I'll be ready," I told him. "I'll watch for you."

"Great." We said our good-byes and hung up.

What are you going to wear? Min asked.

"What's wrong with what I have on?" I looked in the mirror at the loose jeans and oversized shirt I was wearing.

Don't you have anything... tighter? he suggested.

I rolled my eyes. "I look fine," I replied. "It's not like I'm trying to impress someone."

A little while later I saw AJ pull into the drive and I went out to his car, making sure I locked the front door when I closed it.

"Hey," he said, getting out of the car to come around and open my door for me.

"Hey," I replied. I got in and he closed the door before going back around to the driver's seat. "Did you have any problems finding the house?"

"None at all." He pulled out of the drive smoothly and headed for Brenda's. "Brian was pretty clear with his directions."

It only took ten minutes to drive to the Bathori Mansion, the house Brenda lived in. Rafe greeted us at the door and we went into the living room. AJ was carrying a large book I assumed was the one he'd promised Brenda a look at and a bottle of sparkling apple cider. I knew it was cider instead of wine because Rafe is allergic to alcohol.

Rafe led us to an intimate conversation area where snacks were laid out on a low table. Brenda was sitting in one of the two chairs, and when Rafe took the other one, I was forced to sit beside AJ on the couch.

When the conversation turned to the book AJ had brought in, I began to relax for the first time that day. The author was Lucien Knight, and it seemed that he'd done extensive research into the occult and the various preternatural species. He had new theories about all of them, a different mythos than I'd ever read.

For instance, he said that all preternatural species were divided into subcategories that he called tribes and clans by turns. He claimed that the different groups had different abilities, and sometimes they warred over those differences.

Knight believed that Fairies were real, that they were reincarnated into the bodies of humans, not switched with a human baby at birth. These fairies had the ability to make people hallucinate on a whim, and they used that ability to hide their existence.

He wrote that lycanthrope was genetic, not communicable, and that there were many other shapeshifter species as well. He said that most people couldn't remember seeing a shapeshifter even if they'd seen one because of something he called the Delirium.

Knight had found evidence of ghosts, and wrote that there was a type of veil between their world and ours. He said that he'd seen spirits return to their bodies and reanimate them for weeks, and during that time the body would not deteriorate.

His theories about vampires were fairly amusing. He said that a stake through the heart wouldn't kill a vampire, just incapacitate them. He told how vampiric blood could captivate a mortal or another vampire if it were drunk three times, and that if a human drank the blood of a vampire, he would grow strong and gain other abilities both magical and dangerous.

Rafe shifted a little in his chair at that, and I shot him a questioning look that he missed. At the same time, I noticed that Brenda had been studying me, but I couldn't figure out why. Abruptly she stood and held out her hand to me.

"Sam, I have something I need your help with," she told me. "Could you come upstairs with me?"

"Sure." I took her hand and she excused us, then led me toward the stairs.

"I've been thinking about my clothes," she told me as we walked up the steps. "I have way too many of them and I'd like to get rid of some things I don't wear, but most of them are too nice to give to a homeless shelter or anything like that."

"Oh?" I asked, ready to agree with her. She always wore nice things, but nothing suited to spending time on the streets.

"Yeah, and I know that we have the same coloring, so I thought you might like to help me go through them." She led me into her bedroom and toward her huge closet.

I looked at her clothes with my mouth agape. When she'd said she had too many clothes, I hadn't realized that she really had too many clothes. The large closet was crowded with things, and she started pulling shirts out and holding them up against me.

"Brenda," I protested, "I can't do this. I don't wear clothes like this." And I didn't, most of my wardrobe consisted of loose jeans and oversize tee shirts and sweaters. I didn't even own a pair of decent dress shoes.

You should, Min told me.

"Why not?" Brenda asked. "I think this will look nice on you, try it on and see what you think." She was acting like this was no big deal, but I knew what she was trying to do.

So she's trying to help you look better, Min said. *So what? She's going to be your sister, isn't that what family is for? To help you out?*

"I guess," I murmured.

Brenda assumed I was answering her and handed me a shirt, then herded me into the bathroom. Slowly I took off my shirt and pulled the tank top she'd given me over my head.

It could work, Min mused.

"How does it look?" Brenda asked through the door. I let her in and she smiled. "I like it. Now let's see what we have that goes with it." She went back into the closet and returned with a long skirt. "Try this."

I put it on over my jeans and looked in the mirror. I didn't see where it looked good, I thought it made my hips look big.

"Take off your jeans," Brenda prompted. When I did, she smiled again. "I like."

I looked again into the mirror and my eyes widened. I looked almost model thin, and the skirt clung to my hips emphasizing the curves of my body. When Brenda handed me a pair of

boots I put them on without hesitation. If you looked at me from the neck down, you'd think I was another person.

"Now your hair," she murmured, a finger to her lips as she looked at me thoughtfully.

Yes, Min agreed silently.

Brenda gestured for me to sit on the vanity stool and proceeded to show me how to put my hair up in a French twist. Then she carefully applied make up to my skin, teaching me how to use it to enhance my features. My mother had died when I was quite young, and I'd never known how to use cosmetics, so I'd never tried. Brenda showed me how.

By the time she was done, I was speechless.

Min wasn't. *My, you do clean up well. I knew you would. Won't AJ be surprised?*

I wasn't so sure, but Brenda hurried me downstairs before I could tell her I wanted my old clothes back. She led me into the living room and we stood behind the sofa AJ sat on waiting for my brother to notice us.

When Rafe looked up, the shock on his face was well worth any unease I felt in the different clothes. He sat and stared, unable to say a word. He looked at me so long I began to feel uncomfortable and raised a hand to cover the exposed portion of my chest.

AJ noticed Rafe's shock and turned around. His gaze grew so warm that I blushed and looked helplessly at Brenda. She was nearly grinning.

"Rafe," she said sweetly, "we want to go dancing."

"No," he replied flatly.

Her smile never wavered. "Yes. We want to dance, and you are going to take us, or we're going alone."

AJ cleared his throat. "Rafe, if they want to go dancing, we should take them."

Rafe clearly didn't like the idea, but he had no choice but to give in. "Dancing. Looking like that."

Again I glanced at Brenda, ready to go change back and forget the whole thing.

She frowned at my brother. "Rafe, tell your sister how nice she looks," she told him.

He blinked and looked at her for the first time. After a long moment, he smiled at me. "You look beautiful, Sam."

"Yes," AJ breathed so low I almost didn't hear him.

Everything is working perfectly, Min chortled.

"Rafe, could you help me with Jorel?" Brenda asked. Jorel was the puppy he had given her. Until the Friday before, I'd been watching him for a few weeks while their house was being exterminated.

"Sure," he replied, rising. Brenda offered her excuses and they departed leaving AJ and me alone.

"You do look nice, Samantha," he said after a few minutes.

"Thank you," I whispered, looking down. I tried not to shift on my feet, knowing that I probably looked like a little girl dressed in big sister's clothes.

"Do you go dancing often?" he asked.

I glanced up at him, then quickly lowered my eyes. "Not really." Simon didn't like to dance and hated the music I enjoyed. If we went out together, it was always to one of the bars he liked and it usually wasn't fun for me.

The next few minutes were filled with an awkward silence while we waited for Brenda and Rafe to return. When they did, I barely stopped myself from sighing in relief. Brenda took my arm and we went outside to Rafe's car.

DOPPELGÄNGER

VAMPIRE WILLOW: I'M HAVING A TERRIBLE NIGHT. WANNA MAKE IT BETTER?

Brenda kept up a steady stream of conversation while Rafe drove to D'abolique, a dance club on the outskirts of town. Once inside, we sat at one of the high tables that were barely big enough to hold a handful of drinks.

I don't know how I got talked into taking a shot of tequila, but somehow I did. After that first one, the next few didn't seem so bad. The conversation turned to Salem history and I found myself rattling on about the subject to AJ while Brenda and Rafe got up to dance to a slow song.

I fell into an uncomfortable silence, and looked down at my drink.

"Would you like to dance, Samantha?" AJ asked me.

Of course you would, Min suggested.

"Of course I would," I found myself saying. I took AJ's outstretched hand and let him lead me onto the dance floor.

I felt very uncomfortable at first. Simon didn't like to dance so we never had. In fact, this was the first time I'd ever slow danced with anyone other than Rafe. AJ danced very well and soon I was relaxing in his arms.

The music was slow and sensual, and AJ's arms around me felt very nice. He started talking about the novel he was working on and I forgot to be shy about being that close to him. I felt as if I was someone else, as if I'd been able to step outside of myself for this one night and be the beautiful, interesting woman I'd always wanted to be.

Always have been, Min whispered. I ignored him and looked up into AJ's eyes, lost in my fantasy.

We danced together a lot that night, and spent the rest of the time talking about vampires and witches. The book he was writing was to be about vampires in the Salem area that worked with the local witches. The protagonist would be a fairly old vampire, five hundred years or so, that had the body of a ten-year-old girl.

"I'm really having problems with the character," he admitted while we were dancing.

"Brenda had some suggestions that I liked, but right now she seems more like a cardboard villain than a tortured heroine."

"Have you thought about what being in a child's body would be like?" I asked, trying to take my mind off how good his body felt against mine.

"What do you mean?" His voice was low and husky, for my ears only.

"Well, she's five hundred years old," I explained, looking up into his beautiful brown eyes. "She's probably never had a meaningful relationship. I mean, who would want to get involved with a child like that?"

"She has the ability to look like anyone she wants," he told me. "Something like a doppelganger." According to mythology, a doppelganger has the ability to change its shape and size to look like any one or anything it wanted to.

I frowned. "Okay, so she can look like anyone, but can she become anyone? Just because she looks like a twenty-year-old or whatever doesn't mean she feels like one when you touch her. And even if she did, how could she be sure that she wouldn't forget herself in the middle of making love and turn back into a child?"

"Hmm, I see what you mean." His hand was warm on my back as we moved to the music. "That could be a problem."

"So she's probably fallen in love at least once in her life," I suggested. "Five hundred years is a long time not to. There's probably one guy she's head over heels for and maybe he has no idea that she's really this child. Maybe he's a vampire too. Maybe he thinks she's a woman, or even several women over the centuries, if she's good enough."

"I like that," he said encouragingly. "Go on."

"She loves him," I continued, "but she knows that if he finds out what she really is, he'd freak out. So she uses these other identities to get close to him, to become friends with him, knowing that any relationship she has with him is doomed to fail one way or the other. She can't have sex with him and she can't tell him who she really is and risk seeing pity in his eyes."

He smiled. "You have a very good imagination, Samantha," he told me. "Maybe you should be writing books."

Thankfully, the music stopped at that moment and he led me back to the table where Brenda and Rafe were just sitting down.

"It's getting late," my brother commented. "Don't you have school tomorrow?"

"Yeah," I admitted, glancing at my watch. It was nearly two in the morning and I groaned. "Early."

"We'd better get you home then," AJ said with a smile.

A few minutes later we were in Rafe's car on our way back to Brenda's. It didn't occur to me until later that I would have gotten home quicker if they'd dropped me off on the way there, but I wasn't exactly thinking clearly.

At Brenda's, I said my goodnights to her and Rafe, then got into the car with AJ to go home. We talked a little on the ride, mostly about the stars. He had a knowledge of Astronomy that matched my own, not that I was anything close to an expert on the subject.

When he pulled into my drive, we sat in the car for a moment, enjoying the quiet.

"This was a good night," I said honestly. "Thank you."

"I didn't do anything," he protested, turning to look at me.

"No, you did," I told him honestly. "I know it couldn't have been fun teaching me how to dance and everything. And I'm really interested in your new novel, it was great hearing about that."

"Sam, I had a wonderful time teaching you how to dance," he insisted. "It made me feel good just seeing how well you caught on. And I still think you should try writing, I know Rafe would be able to help you out."

"You're being kind," I replied, "but thank you."

"I'm—"

Abruptly there was a loud knock on my window and I turned in surprise to see Simon standing right next to the car door.

"Hey, babe," he said loudly. I couldn't read his face, but I knew he couldn't be happy to see me in AJ's car this early in the morning.

"Thanks again," I told AJ as I opened the door to get out. The last thing I wanted was for Simon to start anything with AJ.

"Anytime," he called after me as I hurriedly closed the door.

I took Simon's arm and led him toward the house. "I really didn't expect you here tonight."

He glanced over his shoulder and watched AJ pull out onto the street. "It's a good thing I came by," he said in a hard voice. "What were you doing with him?"

"You knew he was going to take me to Rafe's," I reminded him. "The four of us talked a long time. AJ was just brining me home."

"Nothing else?" he asked, his voice low and dangerous.

I shot him a questioning glance in the darkness as I unlocked the door, trying to suppress my fear. "What else could there be? I do have a boyfriend, you know."

Simon laughed until I turned the inside light on and he got a look at my clothes, or rather, Brenda's clothes.

"What the hell do you have on, girl?" he asked harshly. "What did you do to your hair?"

I glanced down. "Brenda talked me into trying a few things of hers on." I shrugged. "I thought I'd let her do the little sister makeover, at least for tonight." I reached up and pulled at the pins holding my hair. In a moment, it was hanging free down my back almost to my waist.

"I don't like it," he told me.

"No? Brenda thought it was okay." I swayed a little on my feet, still feeling the effects of the alcohol I'd consumed. "I wasn't sure."

"It's not you, babe," he told me firmly, putting his hands on my shoulders. "It's like there's something that looks like you, and talks like you, but it's not you. You know," he added, "like one of those sci-fi monsters that come in and take over peoples' lives."

"A doppelganger," I whispered. Funny how he'd hit exactly on the way I'd felt earlier in the evening.

"Yeah, that's it," he said. "I like you just the way you are, you don't have to change a damn thing to make me happy."

I forced a smile and looked up at him. He grinned and kissed me lightly.

"Look, I'm gonna get going," he said abruptly. "The guys expected me half an hour ago, they're gonna rag on me for stopping by here. I don't want them to think I'm pussy whipped."

"Of course," I replied absently, trying to remember when the last time he'd stayed at my house long enough to do anything but kiss me goodbye. I couldn't, it had been so long. For a split second I wondered if he had another girlfriend.

He's got something going on all right, Min murmured softly.

I walked Simon to the door and he gave me another chaste kiss before he walked out. As I watched him get in his car and drive away, a part of me was thankful that I hadn't had to make up any excuses to make him leave.

"Well, Min," I said aloud, turning to look into the full-length mirror on the wall nearby. "Everyone but Simon likes the new look. What do you think?"

Smashing, he replied enthusiastically. *I knew you weren't going to let that bugger get you down. Brenda has excellent taste in clothes, you've never looked better.*

"I couldn't agree more, Min," I told him with an impish grin before I took myself to bed.

LIE TO ME

GILES: WHAT DO YOU WANT ME TO SAY?

BUFFY: LIE TO ME.

The next day Brenda called just after sunset and asked me to go shopping with her. I knew what she really wanted was for me to get new clothes. I didn't understand why she was so insistent about it, but a part of me wondered what I would look like in more fashionable clothes, so I agreed. And there was also the matter of a very persistent Avatar who wouldn't shut up until I said yes.

She came by to pick me up and took me to one of the bigger malls near Boston. We spent hours shopping, trying on everything and anything. Brenda kept trying to buy things for me, but I put my foot down.

I tried on an outfit that I really liked, but I wasn't sure if it looked good. I turned to Brenda and asked anxiously, "How do I look?"

"What can I say?" she replied with a smile.

"Lie," I told her, only half joking.

She laughed. "Oh, Sam, I don't have to lie to you. You look gorgeous."

I knew what she was saying couldn't possibly be true, but the lie sounded better than the truth. The truth was that I would never be a beauty, or a glamour queen. The truth was that I could never hope to compete with any other woman in AJ's life. I felt disloyal even thinking that way, I had a boyfriend, after all, no matter how much of a loser he was.

We had a lot of fun, Brenda and I. We shopped until the stores closed, then we went out to eat. It was the most fun I'd had in a long time. When she dropped me off at home it was midnight and I was exhausted.

I slept in late the next day, waking up with just enough time to get ready for work. I had to be there at eleven, and Simon showed up on time for once to have lunch with me. We went into the kitchen and I started taking things out of the refrigerator for the meal.

"So what are you doing Saturday?" he asked me.

"I've got class," I reminded him. "And Rachel wants to get together for a ritual at sundown."

"There's a party at Dirk's house," he protested. "I wanted you to come with me."

I glanced at him as I took out a bag of chips from the cupboard. "You know I don't like those parties," I reminded him. "Anyway, I have the ritual. If I don't go, they won't have thirteen. Rachael is having a hard enough time getting a fill in for Rafe."

"Come on," he said irritably. "When are you gonna start making me a priority? They don't really need you anyway, what can you do that anyone else can't?"

I sat the lunchmeat down on the counter. "Are you saying you want me to quit the coven?" I asked softly as I turned to look at him. Something in the middle of his forehead caught my attention and it almost distracted me from what he was saying.

"I'm not saying that," he said quickly, a little too quickly. "I just think you could find better things to do with your time."

"Like what?" It was a shadow of some sort, it kept appearing and disappearing. I couldn't figure it out. His next words made me forget all about whatever it was.

"I don't know, something. You spend too much time with those people," he told me. He made them sound like freaks of some sort.

"They're not 'those people'," I said harshly. "They're my friends."

"Look, Sam, if you want to stay in the coven, that's up to you," he told me. "I just don't want to see Brenda or anyone else trying to make you into someone you're not."

"Why do you think she's doing that?"

"Because she's a control freak," he bit out. He slapped the counter with his hand and it made me jump a little.

"No," I said softly, trying to calm us both down, "what makes you think she's trying to make me into something I'm not?"

He grabbed the sleeve of the shirt I was wearing. "Those," he replied harshly. "You look like Brenda went through her closet and gave you everything that didn't fit her anymore. You look like shit."

I pried the fabric from his hands gently. If he pulled any harder, he'd rip the shirt I'd paid fifty bucks for. "You don't like it?" I asked to cover my action.

"No, I don't," he admitted harshly. "I can't believe you're planning on going to work that way, everyone's going to laugh at you."

"You know, not everyone thinks I'm ugly," I told him defensively. "Some people actually think I'm pretty."

"Like that writer?" he growled, putting a hand out toward my shoulder.

Instinctively I moved back out of his reach, which made him frown. For a moment I wasn't sure if he was going to try and hit me or not, then he turned away.

"I'm sorry," he said softly. "I've just been a little stressed out lately."

"Yeah," I whispered. He'd been more than stressed. He'd been irritable and grouchy and sometimes he made me afraid of him, like right now. "Look, I have to go to work," I told him. I didn't even have time to change. "Let's just forget we ever talked about this."

"Fine by me," he snapped. "Let's go."

I followed him out to the car and got in without saying another word. He drove quickly and silently through town and pulled into the bookstore parking lot before turning to look at me.

"Hey, I'm sorry," he said softly. "I'll pick you up at eight and take you home so you can change before we go to dinner. We'll relax and forget what we were arguing about."

I nodded and got out of the car without looking at him. More than anything else I wanted to cry.

Why are you letting him get to you? Min asked as I walked toward the employee entrance of the store.

Because he's right. Although I much preferred Brenda's lies to Simon's truths I couldn't deny that he had a point. I wasn't pretty and the new clothes I'd bought just made me look like I was dressed in hand-me-downs.

You are so wrong, Min told me.

If I'm so wrong, why is Simon the only guy that ever looks at me? I demanded irritably. I wasn't looking forward to spending my shift looking like an idiot, but I didn't have any choice now.

What about AJ?

I remembered the way his eyes had shone the night before at D'abolique. Had he really looked at me like that or was that just what the alcohol had made me believe? I shook my head because it didn't really matter. I was dating Simon, and AJ wasn't interested, was he?

We'll see, Min drawled. *We'll see.*

PANGS

BUFFY: AND THEY SAY ROMANCE IS DEAD. OR MAYBE THEY JUST WISH IT.

It was a busy afternoon in the store, with demanding customers and lots of them. All of the other employees had something to say about my new clothes, although I was surprised that no one reacted as Simon predicted they would. Even Brian told me how nice I looked.

I didn't have a minute to think until my shift ended at eight o'clock. I was looking forward to the relaxing dinner that Simon had promised me. A look around the store told me he wasn't there, and a quick glance at the parking lot did the same.

I sighed and went to sit down in the café area of the store. Simon was probably out playing cards with his buddies and lost track of the time. I rubbed my temple to try and ward off the headache I felt coming. I really needed to eat something or I knew that soon my head would be pounding.

"Samantha?" I looked up to see AJ standing beside my table.

"Hey," I said softly, suddenly very self-conscious about my new clothing.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Yeah," I replied. "Just a bit of a headache coming on."

"Oh, sorry." He glanced around for a moment, then gestured to the empty chair across from me. "Can I sit down for a minute?"

"Sure," I told him guardedly. What could he possibly want from me?

Have you looked in the mirror lately? Min asked me.

Hush! I replied sternly. *I can't argue with you and talk to AJ at the same time.*

AJ sat and followed my gaze out the window. "Are you waiting for someone?"

"Yeah," I told him. "Simon was supposed to be here when I got off, but he's running late." I glanced at my watch and found it hard to believe that nearly half an hour had gone by since I'd punched out.

"Oh," AJ murmured.

I could tell he didn't like Simon any more than Rafe did, but I didn't bother to try and defend him. I was coming to believe that Simon just wasn't worth it.

"Are you shopping for a particular book?" I asked AJ.

"Yes," he replied, "but it's out of stock. I was looking for the latest edition of *The Encyclopedia of Witchcraft*. It's supposed to include a biography of Lucien Knight, the author of the book we were discussing Sunday at Brenda's."

"Yeah, it is out of stock," I confirmed. "Actually, I think I bought the last copy we had last week."

He looked at me in surprise. "Brian tells me it may come in on Friday with the weekly shipments."

"It might," I agreed. "You know, if you want, you can borrow my copy. I don't really need it right away, it's just reading material."

"Are you sure?" he asked, sounding excited. "I'd like to check into this Lucien Knight a little further. I find his theories very interesting, even if they are completely different than the common mythology of preternatural creatures."

I smiled, thinking that from what I could tell Knight was a lot closer to the truth than most about some things. "I'm sure."

AJ glanced at his watch. "I thought Brian said you got off at eight tonight, are you sure Simon's supposed to be here? It's quarter to nine."

I looked out the window at the parking lot, but Simon was still not there. "Maybe he forgot," I said softly.

"I could give you a ride home if you'd like," AJ offered.

Tell him you'd very like, Min whispered devilishly.

I really wasn't sure when Simon would show up. He was becoming very undependable, and I knew I couldn't rely on his showing up at all. I smiled shyly at AJ. "If you wouldn't mind," I replied in a quiet voice.

He grinned in return. "Great, let's go."

"You just want to get your hands on the book," I teased him.

He shot a surprised look at my face as if he wasn't sure I was kidding until he saw that I was still smiling at him. He led me out to his car and opened the door for me.

I didn't feel any more comfortable being alone with him in the car than I had the last time. It wasn't as if I was afraid of him, really, but I was afraid of what he made me feel. Being alone with him turned me back into a fifteen-year-old, gawky and shy. I hated feeling that way, but at least he seemed oblivious to my reaction.

We talked about the city as he drove me home. He was very interested in a lot of the historical houses and graveyards, and as I'd lived in Salem all my life, I knew quite a bit about them. The drive passed quickly and too soon he pulled into my driveway.

I got out before he could walk around to open my door, and he followed me up the walk, admiring the flowers near the porch that I had planted earlier in the summer. I unlocked the door in the glow of the porch light I'd left on.

"Come in," I told him, turning on the foyer light. I closed the door behind him and walked toward the study. "The book is in here."

A flick of the light switch illuminated the dark oak cases filled with books. A writing desk sat near the window facing a comfortable love seat. A door to the left led into my bedroom. I spend a great deal of time in this room; it's my favorite in the house.

I walked to the opposite wall and studied the volumes on one of the higher shelves. I found the book he wanted quickly, and took it down. When I turned to hand it to him, I found him standing right behind me and it startled me. He put his hand on my shoulder to steady me, then let go as soon as I regained my balance. My skin felt warm even after he took his hand away.

I blinked and held the book out to him. "Here it is."

"Thank you." He took it slowly, but didn't step back or even look down at it. The look in his eyes made me feel flushed and confused. "That's very pretty," he told me, looking at my neck.

I touched the necklace at my throat and smiled. "It was my mother's."

"It looks nice on you," he said softly.

Before I could reply, there was a knock on the door. I glanced at the window, but the curtains were drawn. AJ stepped back so I could walk to the door without going around him, but he followed me into the foyer. A look through the small window of the door showed Simon waiting impatiently on the porch.

Loser, Min muttered.

I smoothed my shirt over my hips nervously and opened the door. "Simon," I said pleasantly, stepping back to let him in. "I thought you'd forgotten me."

"Not likely, babe," he said, bending to kiss me. He stopped in mid motion when he saw AJ standing behind me. "Why is he here?" he asked in a low voice.

"I gave her a ride home when you didn't show," AJ answered calmly. Then he held up the book that I'd given him. "And borrowing some reference material."

"Well, thanks for seeing her home," Simon told him, putting an arm around my shoulders, "I'll take it from here."

"Simon," I hissed, ashamed at his rudeness. It was almost as if he'd been taking testosterone shots or something.

He's been taking something all right, Min commented mysteriously.

"No," AJ said reassuringly, "he's right. I have some research to do and you two had plans."

"Thank you," I told him with a forced smile. How could Simon behave that way? "If you have problems finding anything else, please let me know. I've got quite a few occult books, I may have what you're looking for."

"Thanks," he said, stepping past us to the door. He looked at me one last time and gave me a brief smile. "Good night."

"Good night," I echoed, reaching for the door to close it behind him.

Simon reached past me and practically slammed the door. "What the hell did he want?" he turned to me and demanded.

"He gave me a ride when you didn't show," I told him crossly, turning to walk toward the kitchen. I didn't have the patience for his temper tonight, my head was pounding and I needed food and aspirin, not necessarily in that order.

"So you just invite him in?" Simon asked, following me.

"He wanted to borrow a book, Simon," I told him as I reached into the pantry for the aspirin. "I couldn't make him wait on the porch while I got it for him."

"I don't like it," he replied sternly. "I don't want you to be alone with him like that."

"Like what?" I shot back. "It's not like we were sky clad or anything." The shadow was back on his forehead, but I still couldn't see what it was. It looked like a hole with charred edges. It faded in and out as we talked as if it couldn't decide if it should be there or not. I couldn't figure out what it was so I asked Min.

Justice, he said cryptically.

"Why do you always use words like that?" Simon asked, suddenly angry. "When are you going to outgrow all that spooky-boo stuff? You know it's childish and evil."

I stared at him in amazement. "You've known me for three years, Simon," I barked harshly. "You knew my interests when we started dating and you didn't have a problem with them then. Why do you have a problem with them now?"

"I don't," he protested. "I just think it's time you grew up and started thinking about normal things, like babies and housekeeping. That coven is evil, Sam, and I don't like you being alone with that writer, he gives me the creeps."

Are you going to let him talk to you like that? Min demanded. *Do you really think the coven is evil? Or that AJ is creepy?*

I shook my head. "Get out," I ordered Simon, finally fed up with his nonsense.

"What?"

"You heard me," I said seriously. "My head is pounding and I don't think we should have this discussion tonight. I think we'd both say things we'd regret."

He reached for my arm and I backed away from his hand. "Babe, we were supposed to have dinner together." He was trying for a reasonable tone, but he still sounded overbearing and demanding.

"An hour ago," I reminded him. I told myself that I shouldn't be afraid of him, but he'd been different lately, more unstable. "Look, right now I just want to grab something to eat and go to bed." At the look in his eye, I added, "Alone."

"Fine," he said, piqued. "If you change your mind, you know where to find me."

Playing poker, Min laughed.

Hush! I ordered him. *I don't need this from you either.*

Simon turned on his heel and took his time walking to the front door. Any other time I would have called him back and relented, but the way he'd treated AJ had pissed me off. And trying to order me not to be alone with the man? I couldn't believe he'd actually told me that my beliefs were evil! For all I cared he could walk out the door and never come back.

When I heard the front door slam, I went to the pantry and took out a soda. I twisted the top from the bottle and took a long drink, then wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. The aspirin didn't seem to be affecting my headache at all. If anything, the pain was worse.

I made a quick sandwich and went to bed. The darkness was like a womb, holding me in the silence of the night. Eventually, I slept.

HELPLESS

BUFFY: YOU BASTARD. ALL THIS TIME, YOU SAW WHAT IT WAS DOING TO ME. ALL THIS TIME, AND YOU DIDN'T SAY A WORD!

GILES: I WANTED TO.

BUFFY: LIAR.

When I woke in the morning, my headache was better but not gone. I had classes that morning, so I hurried through breakfast and drove to the college in Boston. I stopped at the grocery store on my way home, so by the time I had everything put away, it was after one o'clock.

The day had turned out to be a hot one for early September and I decided that a cool shower might drive away the remaining ache in my temples. I felt much better afterward, almost like a new woman. I stood in the closet for a long time, looking at the clothes Brenda had talked me into buying. In an effort to stay cool I pulled on a pair of comfortably close fitting jeans and a short tank top that bared my stomach. I wasn't expecting anyone to visit and I surely wasn't going anywhere, so I didn't bother with a bra or footwear.

I pulled my hair up on the top of my head and secured it with a clip. I ignored the loose tendrils that escaped and padded barefoot into the living room to turn on some music. I'd just put in a disc of love songs when I heard a knock on the door. For some reason, I thought it might be Simon coming to apologize to me.

When I opened the door, I saw AJ standing on the porch. "Oh," I said softly, then cleared my throat and smiled. "Hey."

"Hey," he replied with a smile. His eyes flickered over me and I flushed as I remembered just what I was and was not wearing.

"Um, was the bookstore out of stock on something else you needed?" I asked. It was the only reason I could think of that he'd be at my house.

"No, no," he told me. "I just wanted to apologize for any problems I caused last night."

"There wasn't any problem," I assured him, at least no problems he had caused. I opened the screen door and took a step back. "Would you like to come in?"

"Sure," he said, stepping in. "I wanted to thank you for letting me borrow that book. It's full of interesting things I may be able to use in my novel."

"Great." I didn't know what else to say, so I gestured toward the living room. "Would you like to sit down?"

"I don't want to interrupt you if you're busy," he told me.

"No, I was just putting on some music." I walked into the living room and turned the volume down on the stereo.

"Simon seemed really upset that I was here last night," he said hesitantly. "Are you sure it didn't cause any problems with the two of you?"

I put my hands in my back pockets and shrugged. "He'll get over it." Simon didn't own me, I had a right to have a guy over without him thinking going postal over it. "Would you like a soda?"

"Yeah," he agreed. "I'd love one."

"Okay." I walked through the dining room and into the kitchen. When I reached into the refrigerator for the soda, one strap of my tank top slid down my arm. I turned to put the bottles on the counter and nearly ran into AJ who was standing right beside me. "Oh," I exclaimed softly, surprised by his nearness.

"Sorry," he whispered. "I didn't mean to startle you. Here, let me."

When he reached out, I thought he was going to take one of the bottles from me, but his hand brushed the skin of my arm as he lifted the fallen strap to my shoulder. Goose flesh rose where he touched me, and I shivered.

"Cold?" he asked huskily.

"No," I told him in a husky voice of my own. I thrust one of the bottles at him and he took it just before it would have fallen to the floor. I stepped away from him to stand by the sink.

He twisted the top from the bottle and cleared his voice before he spoke again. "I was very interested in some of the things you said last night."

"Oh?" I didn't know what I'd said that could have possibly interested a famous author like him.

"Yes," he told me. "How do you know so much about sorcerers and witches?"

I hid my sigh of relief; this was a subject I could deal with. "Well, you probably know that Salem is full of witch's covens," I replied, twisting the top off the bottle in my hands. "Actually, I've been a member of one since I was sixteen."

"Alec let you join?" he asked, surprised.

"I didn't actually ask," I told him coolly. Why did everyone think I was a timid little mouse?

Because you act like one, Min whispered. I tried to ignore him.

"I didn't mean to imply anything," AJ said softly. "It's not like you worship the devil or anything."

I shrugged my irritation off. "Rachael is a good friend of mine, she's the priestess of the Black Rose coven," I explained. "She suggested I join when one of the members left, so I did. It's a good coven, we try to help people as much as we can."

"And does anyone in the coven have actual powers?" he asked skeptically.

"Everyone has a power within," I told him with a smile. "Some people can build beautiful things with their hands, others can paint, or write books. It's just a matter of finding that power."

"What power do you have?"

Soon you'll have more power than this mortal could ever imagine, Min told me softly.

I pushed his voice to the back of my mind and looked away. "I haven't actually found my power yet, but I will. Sometimes it takes time."

"You're young yet," he agreed.

"Oh, and you're the ancient one," I said dryly. "Maybe some day I'll have half of the wisdom that you do." I took a long drink from the bottle in my hand, grateful for its coolness.

He had the grace to blush. "I didn't mean it like that, Samantha," he apologized. "I just meant that there was plenty of time for you to find out what you're good at."

I put my soda on the counter and boosted myself up to sit beside it. "I know that I seem young to you," I told him as I settled myself. "It's no big deal, Rafe does the same thing."

He chuckled a little and came closer until he was leaning against the sink. "And Rafe is ancient, is that it?"

Rafe is only seven years older than I am, but sometimes that feels like a lot. I knew AJ was around the same age, and I couldn't resist the impulse to dig back at him. "Way ancient," I agreed with a smile.

"So does the coven dance naked in the park?" AJ asked with a smile.

I rolled my eyes. "It's called 'sky clad,'" I corrected him, "and no, we don't. We wear ceremonial robes in the park." He looked relieved and had lifted his bottle for a drink when I added quite seriously, "We only go sky clad in Rachael's garden."

He choked on his soda and I leaned forward to slap him on the back. I'd gotten in one solid whack when I lost my balance. I would have fallen if AJ hadn't caught me with a hand on my bare waist.

"I was only joking," I whispered, feeling my heart start to pound with his nearness. "Our coven doesn't really go sky clad during rituals." I felt helpless, enthralled by his closeness and the heat in his eyes.

"That's good to know," he whispered back, his face suddenly quite close to mine.

I don't know if I leaned forward or if he pulled me closer, but when our lips met, all rational thought fled from my mind. His lips tasted like the soda he'd been drinking, but beneath that he tasted all male. For a minute I forgot to breathe and when I remembered, I couldn't get enough oxygen in my lungs.

Somehow he ended up standing between my legs with his hands underneath the back of my shirt. My skin tingled where he touched me, and my body leapt in response to the caress. Our tongues mingled until I couldn't tell where his mouth ended and mine began. I found myself pressed up against his chest, the buttons of his shirt pressing into my stomach.

I'd never experienced anything like that kiss. It was as if time stood still, yet stretched out into infinity. Something in my heart stirred, something I'd never known existed. His breath was warm against my cheek, and the masculine scent of his after-shave nearly drove me wild.

It's hard to say who pulled away first, but somehow we ended up staring at each other in surprise. I had no idea how long the kiss had lasted, but I felt as if I'd just been through an earthquake. Every inch of my body vibrated, longing for his touch.

"What just happened here?" he whispered, his hands still on my waist. Was he stunned because the kiss had affected him as much as it had me? Or was he surprised that he had kissed me in the first place? I had to assume it was the later.

Kiss him again, Min insisted. You know you want to.

I shook my head, confused to my very core and trying to deny what he had made me feel. I'd had no idea that a simple meeting of the lips could change the entire world, but this one had. I licked my lips and I could still taste him.

As he released me and backed away, something passed behind his eyes and was gone. "I'm sorry," he told me. "I didn't mean to be presumptuous. I—"

"It was just a kiss, AJ," I told him, trying not to sound as disappointed at his withdrawal as I felt. "It didn't mean anything."

"Of course," he agreed. "Things like this happen every day." I didn't know him well enough to tell if it was sarcasm that I heard in his voice or not.

"I'm sure it does," I agreed honestly. People kissed every day, didn't they? A kiss shouldn't be anything to get this worked up over, I told myself. My self wasn't listening.

He took several more steps backward and I slid off of the counter. "Look, I've got to go," he told me. "Are you okay?"

I shrugged and pretended indifference. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"Yeah," he said. "I'll see you later." With that he turned and strode quickly from the room. Moments later I heard the door close and I leaned back against the counter before I could fall.

What in the world had happened during that kiss? What had come over me? Over him? I'd never felt anything like that in my entire life. Simon had certainly never come anywhere near making me feel like AJ had made me feel during one simple kiss.

When I felt that my legs could support me again, I spent nearly an hour pacing the house restlessly. I tried to figure out how AJ's kiss could have affected me so deeply. After all, I had a boyfriend, and I wasn't supposed to feel things like that with anyone but Simon.

You've never felt anything like that with Simon, Min whispered insistently.

I closed my eyes. I'd known for a long time that I didn't love Simon, but I kept thinking that someday I would. After all, who was going to look at me if I left him? I had no illusions about any beauty that I might have had, I knew I wasn't even pretty. I didn't want to spend my life alone and end up an old spinster that all the neighborhood kids ran from. Simon was the only guy who had ever tried to get close to me.

AJ tried, Min reminded me. *Simon just thinks you're immature and evil.*

I ignored him and continued pacing, hoping that for once the Avatar would shut up. The kiss with AJ had been a quirk of circumstance. If it weren't for the clothes that Brenda had insisted I buy, he never would have looked at me twice. And the kiss was a fluke, it had to be. There were so many gorgeous women in New York, I could never hope to compete with even the plainest among them.

Regardless of AJ's reasons for kissing me and my reasons for reacting as I had, the experience had told me one thing; if I could respond to another man that way, it was long past time for me to break up with Simon. I knew he wouldn't like it, and he sure wouldn't understand it, but I felt I had to get it over and done with as soon as possible. Staying with him because it was easier for me wasn't fair to him.

Eventually I changed my clothes and left the house to go looking for Simon. I found him right where I thought I would; in the park downtown playing poker with his buddies. I approached the table quietly and greeted everyone before I touched Simon's shoulder.

"Can we talk?" I asked him quietly.

He glanced at me. "Can't it wait until I finish this?" he asked, sounding bored for the benefit of his friends, I was sure.

I shook my head. "It's important."

"Okay," he replied, throwing down his cards and leading me away from the table. When we were out of hearing distance, he turned and threw his arm around my shoulder. "What is it, Samantha?"

I shrugged out of his grasp and backed away from him. "I've been doing some thinking," I told him.

He laughed. "That's dangerous."

"This isn't funny, Simon," I said carefully. "I've been thinking and I don't think we should see each other any more."

He sobered quickly. "You can't be serious."

"I am," I replied firmly. "I think we should break up."

"No," he told me, anger slicing through his eyes. "I don't think so."

"I didn't ask your permission," I advised him, getting a little angry myself. I shoved my hands in my pockets to hide their shaking. "I know this out of the blue, but you can't tell me that you've been real happy about the way things have been lately, either. We really don't have that much in common."

He grabbed me by the upper arms, his hands painfully tight. "Do you really think you can break up with me like this?" he demanded angrily. "You belong to me, you can't just walk out when you feel like it."

"Let me go, Simon," I told him, wincing at the fear in my own voice. "I don't love you." The strength in his bruising grip made something dance at the edges of my memory, something about the night at Mother Abigail's.

"Yes, you do," he told me. He shook me once, hard. "Just because you bought some new clothes and walk around looking like a slut doesn't mean you don't love me anymore."

I couldn't believe he was doing this. I knew he had a temper, and I'd always been careful before not to provoke him, but I didn't think he'd ever take it out on me like this. For the second time today I felt helpless, but for an entirely different reason.

"Let me go, Simon," I repeated in a stronger voice. "I mean it. I don't want to see you anymore. I don't love you."

He shook me again until my head was spinning. "You love me," he repeated. "You know that McLean is just trying to take you away from me to prove that he can," he told me in a nasty voice. "He doesn't care about you, not like I do. He'll go back to New York and forget your piece of tail ever existed."

An image crashed through my mind of a tall man in an expensive suit holding a large gun. I watched him hit Abigail with it and she fell to the ground. He grabbed me by the hair and the light danced on his elongated fangs as he bent to bite my neck.

Don't remember! Min shouted in my mind.

I blinked the vision away and pushed hard against Simon's chest. He let me go easier than I expected and I went flying to land on my back on the ground.

"That's just where he wants you," Simon said cruelly. "He'll fuck you and forget you just as easily."

"Leave me alone, Simon," I told him, my voice shaking as I scrambled unsteadily to my feet. I knew that everything he was saying about AJ was true, but AJ wasn't the only reason I'd decided to break up with Simon. His violence just made me want out even more. "I don't want to see you again."

"Yes you do," he replied with a smug smile on his face as he watched me stumble to my car. "You will."

I fumbled for the door handle and got in quickly. I pulled away from the curb then slammed on my brakes to miss a passing car. Between the vision I'd had and Simon's behavior, I was nearly hysterical. I took shallow breaths to control my fear and drove carefully away from downtown Salem and Simon.

PASSION

ANGELUS: PASSION. IT LIES IN ALL OF US.... IF WE COULD LIVE WITHOUT PASSION, MAYBE WE'D KNOW SOME KIND OF PEACE. BUT WE WOULD BE HOLLOW.... WITHOUT PASSION, WE'D BE TRULY DEAD.

When I got home I went immediately to my closet and changed into an old shirt that covered the bruises already forming on my upper arms. I kept telling myself that Simon hadn't meant to hurt me, that he never would have hurt me if I hadn't decided to break up with him. Somehow I couldn't quite believe it. Deep down I knew I was lucky he hadn't done more to hurt me.

Min kept telling me to forget the vision I'd had when Simon was shaking me, but I couldn't. I couldn't stop thinking about that and I couldn't stop worrying about Simon.

I was terrified that Simon would come over, that he would try to convince me to take him back. I was so frightened of what he would do if he showed up and I was there alone. Somehow I had him and the man in the suit from Mother Abigail's mixed up in my mind. With shaking hands I dialed Brian's number. I didn't really want to be alone and he was the only person I could trust not to do the whole 'I told you so' thing.

AJ answered the phone on the second ring. I took a deep breath to try and calm myself before I asked for Brian. "He's not here," AJ told me.

"D-do you know where he is?" I asked. I wasn't doing very well at hiding my emotions, because AJ picked up on the catch in my voice right away.

"Samantha?" he asked. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," I told him firmly. "Do you know where Brian is?" I knew he wasn't working today, but I didn't know what his plans were.

"No, I don't," he replied. "Look, is something wrong? I could—"

"No," I said too quickly. "I'm fine. Just have Brian call me when he gets there, please?" I bit down on my lip to stop the sobs that threatened to overwhelm me.

"Samantha—"

"Look, just have him call," I repeated curtly, then hung up the phone before he could say anything else.

I went through the house closing and locking all of the windows and doors. When I was sure I was locked in, I went into the bedroom and sat down in the middle of the bed. I pulled my knees up to my chin and closed my eyes, praying to all the entities I could name that Simon would leave me alone, and that I wouldn't remember anything else about the attack on Mother Abigail's.

The fierce pounding on the door a little while later caught me by surprise. At first I was going to ignore it, hoping that it wasn't Simon, or the man in the suit. I prayed that whoever it was would just go away. He didn't.

"Samantha!" I heard from the front porch. It was AJ, although I couldn't figure out why he was there. "Samantha, open the door!"

I wiped my tears and went to a window in the den to see if he was alone. He saw me the instant I peaked through the blinds at him.

"Samantha," he said, looking very relieved. "Let me in, now."

I couldn't let him stand on the porch all night and I knew that he wouldn't just go away quietly without talking to me. I went into the foyer and unlocked the deadbolt, leaving the chain in place. I opened the door as far as the chain would allow. "What do you want?"

"I just want to make sure you're all right," he told me. "Let me in."

"No," I said. "I'm fine. You didn't need to come here."

He laid a hand on the oak door and leaned closer. "You've been crying, Samantha," he said softly. "I just want to make sure you're okay, then I'll leave." When I hesitated, he added, "If you won't let me in, maybe you'll let Rafe in."

I stared at him in disbelief; would he really go get my brother if I didn't let him in? Something in his eyes told me that he would.

"Hold on a minute," I said finally. I closed the door and wiped my face again, hoping to erase the last evidence of my tears. I wipe my hands nervously on my legs and unchained the door. When I opened it again, he pushed it open widely and stepped past me without waiting for me to move back.

"What's the matter?" he asked quietly. After a quick look around, he turned back to me and closed the door. "You sounded scared on the phone, did something frighten you?"

"No," I lied. "I-I just wanted to talk to Brian. There was no big emergency, y-you didn't have to show up like this."

"I was worried about you," he replied. "You sounded like you were crying, and you look like you were, too. What's wrong?"

"You know," I said, turning away and trying desperately to hide the shaking of my voice, "you don't have any right to barge in here like this. I wasn't crying anyway, and I just wanted to talk to Brian."

He grabbed my arm to turn me back around and I couldn't stop the quick intake of breath at the pain he inadvertently caused. I pulled away from his hand, but he reached for me again. This time I gasped at the pain, and he immediately pulled his hand away.

"What's the matter?" he demanded.

"Nothing," I told him, walked from the foyer into the study. Somehow I thought if I could just get into the bedroom, he wouldn't follow me there, but of course he did, catching my wrist just as I was reaching to close the door behind me.

He pushed up the sleeve of my shirt and cursed softly under his breath. "What did he do to you?" he asked when he saw the beginnings of bruises on my upper arm.

I pulled away. "Nothing," I repeated quickly. "It was an accident, he didn't mean to hurt me."

"Yeah," he said in a hard voice. "That kind of guy never does, Samantha, but they do just the same. Has he done this before? Does Rafe know?"

I couldn't even begin to think what my brother would do if he found out that Simon had hurt me. "Please, you can't tell Rafe," I begged AJ. "He'd go spastic."

"How long are you going to let this happen?" he demanded angrily.

I looked away. "Simon was very upset, he didn't mean to hurt me." When AJ would have spoken, I continued. "I broke up with him, that's why he was so pissed. He needs me, he doesn't want to lose me."

"You broke up with him?" AJ asked softly, surprised.

"Yeah," I whispered, unable to meet his eyes.

"Why?"

I couldn't believe he was asking me that. I pulled away from his hand and took a step further into the room. My hands were shaking and I hugged myself to stop their nervous movements. I didn't want to admit that the kiss we'd shared that afternoon had taken me places I'd never even glimpsed with Simon.

"Samantha," he prompted, following me. "Why did you break up with him? Has he hurt you before?"

"Simon has a temper, but that's not why I broke up with him," I told him firmly. "I just—"

AJ put his hand on my lower back and walked around in front of me. He put a finger under my chin and lifted my face to his. Looking into his eyes, I found it impossible to lie to him.

"I don't love him," I said honestly.

"You don't?" he asked softly, his eyes on my mouth.

"No," I breathed.

"Good," he whispered as his face drew close to mine.

Once again his kiss made things inside of me blossom. He pulled me closer and I tangled my fingers in his hair. His hands pushed my shirt up and ran up the length of my back, making my skin tingle.

If anything, this kiss was more intense than the one we'd shared earlier. I stood on tiptoe trying to reach more of his mouth and he lifted me off my feet. I heard someone moan and realized that it was me. Our tongues moved together in an ancient dance as old as time. I couldn't breathe, couldn't think, couldn't stop.

When AJ's hand slid down the side of my body, I thought I would die from desire. I felt him walk a few feet, then he stood me by the bed. He turned and knelt on it, pulling me after him until we were facing each other on our knees.

While his hands caressed my back and buttocks, my own hands were busy trying to unbutton his shirt. I hadn't had much practice at that, Simon wore mostly tee shirts. But I wasn't thinking of Simon just then, all I could think of was touching AJ's skin.

When he realized what I was trying to do, he helped me get his shirt off. I ran my hands down his chest and the palms of my hands tingled from his heat. He pushed my shirt upward and broke the kiss so he could lift it over my head.

We were both breathing hard as we looked at each other. There was fire in his eyes, and it made me even more breathless than I'd been before.

"I—you should know that I don't just... fall into bed with anybody," I whispered hesitantly. "Simon and I—he's the only one I've ever..." I could feel myself blush and couldn't continue.

"I understand," AJ replied softly. He reached out and slowly ran his fingertip down the side of my face. When he reached my chin, he continued down my neck, then toward my breast, watching me carefully, waiting for my reaction. When his fingers reached my nipple, I closed my eyes and moaned softly. When I would have pulled his head down for another kiss, he resisted.

"Are you sure, Samantha?" he asked, his voice like honey to my senses.

"Positive," I told him, looking deep into his eyes.

He looked back at me for a moment, then gave into the pressure of my hands pulling him closer. When his lips touched mine again, I lost all sense of reality.

What seemed like seconds later we were lying on the bed naked, our bodies touching from shoulder to toes. He rolled on top of me and I spread my legs for his entrance. I wanted to scream from the pleasure he gave me. My hands dug into his shoulders and I had to fight myself not to claw at his back.

I felt his lips rough on my neck and I arched to give him better access. His hands found my breasts again and I tugged on his hair until he kissed me again. It seemed as if we made love forever, the pleasure just went on and on. It rolled over me like a locomotive, leaving me weak and lifeless when we were done.

He rolled to the side and pulled along me with him. He tucked my head against his neck and I felt him kiss my hair as I sighed and fell asleep wrapped in his arms.

SURPRISE

CORDELIA: SURPRISE!

OZ: THAT PRETTY MUCH SUMS IT UP.

Trouble, Min warned, waking me instantly from sleep.

I opened my eyes and a mere second later heard a man yelling and pounding on the front door. When I realized it was Simon I started to shake.

"What is it?" AJ demanded quietly, holding me against his side.

"Samantha!" he bellowed. "Let me in, right now!"

I hadn't realized that I had clutched at AJ in terror until I forced myself to let him go. "It's Simon," I whispered.

"Samantha!" Simon roared again. He sounded drunk.

AJ sat up quickly and reached for his pants. "I'll take care of this."

I jumped up after him, searching for my own clothes. I pulled on my jeans and grabbed the first shirt I came across. Unfortunately, it wasn't mine. Of course, with AJ's state of undress, it probably wouldn't have mattered if I had found my own.

AJ reached the door before I did and turned on the outside light, blinding Simon for a moment. He opened the oak door and barked, "What do you want?"

Simon was taken by surprise at AJ's appearance, and actually took a step back. He recovered himself quickly enough. "What the hell are you doing back here?" he demanded angrily. "Where's my girlfriend?"

"I'm not your girlfriend," I told him from behind AJ. I felt like a coward, but my hands were shaking and I was so afraid of what Simon might do.

To my surprise, the hole in his forehead was back, but now it was very pronounced. There was something dark and viscous trickling from it. I knew it wasn't real, but somehow I knew it would be. What the hell was it?

"Samantha," Simon said angrily, taking in my clothing or rather my lack of it, "you fucked him, didn't you?"

I blinked and looked at AJ. When it became apparent that he was waiting for me to answer Simon, I did. "What I did or did not do is not your business, Simon," I told him adamantly. "I am not your girlfriend anymore."

"Can't you just admit it?" Simon asked. "Can't you admit that you dumped me so you could fuck him?"

When AJ opened his mouth to answer Simon, I stepped forward and laid my hand on his arm. "I didn't dump you to have sex with him, Simon," I told him feeling suddenly calm, "but yes, I did sleep with him. Now I want you to leave."

I'd thought Simon was angry before, but now he was livid. He stepped forward and tried to open the screen door. AJ forcefully pushed the door open, forcing Simon backward. He stepped out and put a hand on Simon's chest, pushing him back to the top of the steps. I followed him out, ashamed that I had brought the two of them to this. My fingernails dug into my palms until they bled. I had to do something to stop this; I couldn't let them fight over me.

When AJ heard me in the doorway, he turned. "Sam, go back in the house," he told me urgently.

Simon saw this as an opportunity to get his best shot in. I watched him pull back his fist and knew he would have struck AJ from behind, except something happened. Once again I

concentrated the way Min had taught me. When I did, Simon fell down the steps to the ground, even though AJ had never touched him.

"Oh, goddess," I gasped, dashing around AJ to where Simon lay. "I'm so sorry," I cried. "Are you alright?"

He slapped my hands away. "Leave me alone, bitch," he exclaimed harshly. "I don't want your hands on me after you've fucked him."

Stunned by the intensity of his reaction, I pulled back. AJ caught me before I fell and he helped me to my feet, pushing me behind his back.

"You have no right to speak to her like that," AJ said in a low voice. "Samantha told you what she wants, and it's her decision. If she chooses to call you again, that is her decision too. In the mean time, get the hell out of here before I beat you to within an inch of your life."

Apprehension dawned in Simon's eyes and he rose slowly to his feet. "You're gonna regret this, both of you. I'll make sure of it," he said menacingly. He gave me a meaningful look and added, "You know how to get a hold of me, Samantha. Maybe when he's done with you I'll let you crawl back to me." With that parting shot, he turned and stormed to his car.

AJ watched him get in and drive away. My knees suddenly felt weak and I found myself slumping to the ground. AJ turned and caught me before I collapsed. "Are you okay?" he asked, his hands on my waist.

"Yeah," I whispered. "I just didn't...."

"Expect him to come here?"

I nodded. "I didn't want you to fight," I told him.

He pulled me into his arms and kissed the top of my head. "Let's go in," he suggested. I let him lead me inside and back to the bedroom. He sat me down on the bed and crouched in front of me, taking my hands. Then he noticed the blood.

"What did you do, Sam?" he murmured in surprise, looking up at me.

I shook my head, unable to explain the fear and confusion I'd felt, or what Min had taught me to do.

"Let's clean this up." He rose and went into the bathroom, coming back a few minutes later with a warm wash cloth. He carefully cleaned off the palms of my hands, then went back to the bathroom for an antiseptic cream to ease into the wounds. By the time he was done, my palms were covered with small bandages over each tiny wound.

"I wouldn't have let him hurt you," he told me.

"I know," I replied honestly. "I was more worried that he would hurt you. He likes to fight, he's good at it."

AJ shook his head. "I don't understand why—" He stopped himself before he went any further and for that I was grateful. I wasn't sure why I'd stayed with Simon after I found out what he was like, I knew I couldn't explain it to him.

"What matters is that it's over," I told him. "Hopefully, he'll never bother me again."

"Yeah," he agreed, but somehow I didn't think he believed it.

At that moment the phone rang. I picked it up quickly and found Brian on the other end. He'd seen my number on his Caller ID and mentioned in passing that he was looking for AJ.

"You're looking for AJ?" I asked, shooting a questioning glance at AJ. When he held his hand out for the phone, I said, "Actually, he's here. Hold on a minute." I handed the phone over in silence.

"Hey, Brian," AJ greeted my cousin. "What am I doing here?" He looked at me. "There was a little trouble here earlier, Sam asked me to come over and sit with her a while."

I winced; only family and close friends called me Sam. AJ had managed to say the perfect thing to make Brian wonder what was going on between us.

"I'm not sure how much longer I'll be," AJ said softly. "I may end up checking out some of the local night life, so don't wait up for me."

I fell back on the bed and covered my face. If Brian found out about this, he would never let me live it down. Stupid little Sam falling for the city boy's charm.

Why can't you give the guy a chance? Min asked insistently.

Groaning aloud was not an option, but I could still do it silently. *Because I'm not the type of girl a man like him is attracted to.*

Really? the Avatar asked. *Looks like he's pretty attracted to me.*

I felt a hand on my stomach and looked up at AJ, who was off the phone and had climbed onto the bed with me.

"Is there something wrong?" he asked, concerned.

I shook my head and tried not to feel the warmth of his skin on mine. "Everything all right with Brian?"

"Yeah," he replied with a smile. "He just wanted to make sure I wasn't bothering you with my questions." He moved his hand along my stomach, watching my face. "I'm not bothering you, am I?"

I shivered and shook my head.

"Cold?" he asked, grinning. His hand moved up my ribcage toward my breasts.

I couldn't stop myself from smiling in return. "Warm me?"

He lowered his head and kissed me. I felt his fingers unbuttoning the shirt I wore, and I ran my hand on his heated chest. That quickly, I was lost. We came together in a heated rush that was breathtaking.

"Are you hungry?" he asked me a long time later.

I glanced at the clock; it was after one in the morning. "Starved." I wasn't sure what I wanted more, food, or AJ. "Let's get something to eat."

I put on his shirt again to hide my nakedness while he pulled on his jeans. I took his hand led him into the kitchen, where I lit several candles on the counter top. While he dove into the refrigerator for snacks, I went into the pantry. I brought cookies and crackers to the breakfast bar at the same time he sat down milk and cheese.

He chuckled. "Looks like we had similar ideas," he said softly.

A quick trip to the cupboard brought the necessary plates and napkins. We sat close together and began to eat. Soon we were feeding and teasing each other with the food.

Your brother's a pretty nice guy, isn't he? Min asked suddenly.

Yeah, why? I replied.

He's here.

I closed my eyes to hide the surprise in them from AJ. I looked down and quickly began fastening the rest of the buttons on AJ's shirt.

"What's the matter?" AJ asked, laying a hand on my bare knee.

I smiled at him just as the overhead light came on.

"Samantha?" I looked past AJ to the kitchen doorway where Rafe stood. He glanced at the man seated between us, but couldn't see his face. "What's going on?"

Hearing my brother's voice, AJ closed his eyes and lowered his head. I could tell he hadn't thought about what would happen when Rafe found out we'd slept together.

Covering AJ's hand on my leg with my own, I said, "Nothing, Rafe. We were just getting something to eat."

AJ slid his hand out from under mine and turned toward the doorway with a smile. "Hey, Rafe."

To my brother's credit, he didn't get pissed right away. "AJ." He looked from me to his friend, then back to me again. I could see the surprise and confusion on his face as he stepped further into the room. "Sam? Can I talk to you for a minute?"

"Sure." I stood and laid my hand on AJ's shoulder reassuringly. "I'll be right back," I told him softly. I followed Rafe through the foyer and into the living room where he'd turned to wait for me. "What do you need, Rafe?"

"Brian called me," he replied. "He said that AJ told him there'd been some trouble here earlier and that he was sitting with you for a while. When it started getting late, he called me. What's going on?"

The next time I talked to Brian, I'd give him a piece of my mind. "There was a problem earlier with Simon," I admitted. "We took care of it."

He studied my face for a minute, apparently seeing the worry that I couldn't hide. He put his arms around me. "If you need to talk about this..."

I hugged him back. "I'll be okay, Rafe," I whispered, hoping it was true.

"You called Brian but you didn't call me," Rafe murmured. "Why, Sam? Didn't you think I could help you?"

I couldn't help but laugh. "Oh, I knew you would help me," I told him wryly. "You'd help me right over to Brenda's and make me stay with you. I told you, I'm a big girl now. I can take care of myself."

When he moved back, he put his hands on my upper arms and squeezed lightly. Whatever he'd been about to say was lost when I gasped. He grabbed my wrist and pulled up the sleeve of AJ's shirt until he could see the bruises on my arm.

"What the fuck is this, Sam?" he demanded harshly, no longer making an effort to keep his voice down. He looked down at me with murder in his eyes, his friend's murder. "Did AJ do this to you? Did he force you?"

I shook my head. "No, Rafe," I said urgently, trying to calm him down. I'd never seen this kind of rage in him. "AJ didn't do this, he didn't hurt me."

When he ignored me and would have moved past me for the kitchen, I grabbed his arm and turned him around. "Rafael, you have to listen to me," I insisted frantically. For the first time in my life, I was actually afraid of my brother. "AJ didn't force me to do anything!"

"It was Simon," AJ said from the dining room. Apparently he had heard Rafe ask about the bruises and was coming toward us.

Rafe looked at AJ with skepticism on his face, still tense and ready for a fight. "Why would Simon do that?"

"Because I broke up with him," I said softly looking at my brother with shame in my eyes. "He got mad and told me I belonged to him. He hurt me."

I watched the fight go out of him at my words and he pulled me back into his arms to hold me gently against his chest. I took a deep breath and closed my eyes, letting his strength ease away the fear that had taken a hold of my heart.

"Samantha called Brian's sounding really upset," AJ told Rafe. "Brian wasn't home so I came over to check on her and it's a good thing I did. Simon showed up and was pretty obnoxious. He threatened her."

Why did he have to go and tell Rafe everything? I would have like to keep my brother out of as much of this trouble as possible, but it looked like AJ wasn't going to allow that to happen.

"And you decided the best place to keep an eye on her was from her bed?" Rafe asked, his voice hard.

I punched him in the stomach hard and stepped away from him. "That was uncalled for, Rafe. You have no idea what you're talking about."

He stood there holding his stomach, but didn't even seem fazed. "Do you want to try and tell me you didn't sleep with him?" he asked challengingly.

I would have to be stupid to try and tell my brother that. AJ was standing in the doorway to the dining room wearing nothing but a pair of jeans and I was wearing only his shirt. "I am a big girl now," I told him bluntly. "I have to learn how to stand or fall on my own, Rafe."

He looked down at me for a minute and took a deep breath. "Sam, I know you're a big girl," he said softly, shooting a glance toward AJ. "But I'm still your brother and I don't want to see you get hurt. I don't care if he is one of my best friends. Are you sure you know what you're doing?"

"I know what to expect," I answered with a sad smile. "I'm not that naive."

He reached out and touched my face. "I didn't mean to treat you like a child," he said softly. "You grew up while I was away."

I covered his hand with mine. "Get used to it, bro," I told him gently.

He smiled. "Let me call Brian and let him know he can stop worrying," he replied as he walked toward the kitchen. "You get your things together and—"

"I don't think so," I informed him firmly. "I'm not going to Brenda's with you." Rafe stopped and looked at me. I could understand his surprise; usually when someone tells me what to do, I do it without question. It seems I'd grown a backbone in the last few days.

That's my girl, Min whispered. You don't want to be anywhere but here.

"I'm not going to let Simon run me out of my house," I added stubbornly, ignoring my avatar. "I'll be all right by myself, I'm not going anywhere."

"I'll take care of her," AJ told him.

"That's what I'm afraid of," Rafe muttered under his breath.

I shot him a harsh look and he had the grace to look guilty at his comment. "Simon won't be back," I assured him. "I'll be just fine by myself."

Rafe looked past me to AJ. "You'll stay here tonight?"

"Yeah," AJ replied.

"Okay." Rafe seemed a little relieved, and I noticed for the first time that he seemed upset about something else.

"What's the matter, Rafe?" I asked him softly.

He glanced at me. "Brenda's not feeling well," he replied. "I left her with Christina, but I'm worried about her."

"You don't need to stay here," I declared. "Go home, be with your girl."

He looked down at me for a minute, then bent to kiss my cheek. "Call me if you need me," he said firmly, then looked at AJ. "Call me if Simon comes back."

"I will," AJ promised.

I watched Rafe leave and wondered what was wrong with Brenda. AJ startled me by putting a hand on my shoulder.

"Still hungry?" he asked.

I turned to look at him. "Not really," I confessed. "Mostly tired now. I'll get things put away."

He followed me into the kitchen and helped me clean up, then took me by the hand and led me back into the bedroom. We undressed silently and climbed into the bed together. I felt a little self-conscious and would have stayed on the side of the bed, but he scooted closer and pulled me against his side.

It took me a little while to relax, but eventually I did. It hadn't seemed to bother him that Rafe knew what we had done, but I wasn't sure if AJ regretted making love with me.

"Does it bother you that your brother knows about us?" he asked quietly into the darkness a few minutes later.

"Rafe has to learn sooner or later that I can take care of myself," I told him softly. "It's better he learns it sooner rather than later. Does it bother you?"

"I don't want him to think less of you," he answered, kissing my temple. "Actually, I'm surprised he didn't beat my ass."

"I would have protected you," I said, chuckling.

He laughed too. "Well, that's good to know, I'd hate to have you watch me get beaten and not do anything."

His skin was warm beneath my cheek and I could hear his heart beating. It felt so good to just be held by him. I closed my eyes and worked on committing that moment to memory. I knew we had just this night, and I wished I had a way to make it last forever. Eventually, I slept.

ANGEL

XANDER: WHOA, WELL, LET'S STOP THIS CRAZY WHIRLIGIG OF FUN! I'M DIZZY!

The next night I pulled into my driveway to find Rafe's car already parked there. "Great," I mumbled to myself. I wasn't looking forward to another lecture, either from Brenda or my brother.

"It's really good to see you," I said when I got out of the car. "I wasn't expecting you. What are you doing here?" Okay, that sounded rude. "Brenda, how are you doing?"

"Oh, fine," she said as she came over to kiss me on the cheek.

"What are you guys—" I sighed and dropped the pretense. "Are you checking up on me?" Rafe pretended ignorance. "Now why would we do that?"

Brenda laughed and put her arm around my shoulder. As we walked toward the house, she said confidentially, "Well, you know how men are."

I smiled. "Yeah, not just men, big brothers."

"I wanted to come over and talk to you," she told me as I unlocked the door. "Rafe told me some things that I'm not really sure I like."

I glanced at my brother, and led them into the house. "I'm fine," I told her as I set my purse down on a table in the hall. "You don't have to worry about me."

Brenda looked at my brother. "Rafe, you look thirsty, why don't you go get some drinks for you and Sam?"

He glanced at me reproachfully. "I'm not going to find AJ in the kitchen, am I?"

I rolled my eyes at him and didn't dignify his comment with an answer.

"Rafe you're not helping the situation," Brenda warned him pleasantly.

He looked away. "Okay, drinks. You want anything?"

"No, I'm fine," she told him.

Brenda and I went into the living room and sat down on the couch. "Why are you trying to get rid of Rafe?" I asked her.

"I wanted to talk to you." She searched my face carefully. "Is everything okay? Rafe told me what happened as he knows it."

I looked away, not sure exactly which event she was talking about.

"I just want you to know that I'm not going to press you for anything," she assured me. "If you want to talk, I'm here to talk."

My hands started to tremble, and I drew a deep breath to try and control the tears I felt threatening. Brenda laid her hand over mine and I looked down at our hands.

"Do you want to talk about it?" She seemed so sympathetic, and I knew I could talk to her about everything if I wanted to. In the last two years I'd learned I could count on her no matter what was going on.

She's a bloody Angel, Min commented dryly.

"I don't know where to start," I admitted, ignoring the Avatar.

She smiled. "Just start talking it will eventually all come out."

I nodded, still looking down. "I didn't think that he looked at me like that. I didn't think that he would think... anything like that. He spent the night last night, Brenda," I whispered.

She smiled and squeezed my hand encouragingly.

I told her everything, from AJ coming over earlier in the day and the kiss we shared to the fact that Simon hadn't been around a lot in the last few months. I told her that I'd decided to break up with Simon and that I'd found him downtown playing cards with his buddies.

"We went into the park and I told him that I didn't love him and that I didn't want to see him anymore," I told her softly, remembering my fear. "Then he grabbed a hold of me and just started shaking me. And it was it was really scary and it was really—" My voice broke and for a moment I couldn't go on.

"I got away and came home," I told her finally. "I tried to call Brian but he wasn't home and AJ was there and he came by and it just one thing led to another whole thing and...." I looked up at her, expecting some kind of judgement on her face, but she just nodded.

I went on to tell her about Simon coming to the house and finding AJ and I in various stages of undress. I told her about the argument he and AJ had, and how Simon had fallen down the steps.

"I didn't mean to do that," I confessed, meaning causing Simon's fall. I told her about Rafe showing up and explaining to him that Simon had hurt me. "My god, I've never seen him like that before, it was so weird, I've seen him mad, but this, I was afraid he was going to kill AJ," I whispered. "I had to calm him down. And then I had school this morning, and AJ left at the same time. I haven't heard from him and I don't know what's going to happen. I mean I know he's going to go back to New York, and I know it doesn't mean anything for him, I know it, but...." All right, now I was rambling. "I don't know."

"But you do have some kind of feelings for him, don't you?" She asked after I quieted.

"Well, I'd have to, wouldn't I?" Did she really think that I'd sleep with him and not care about him at all? The problem was I didn't know just what I felt about AJ.

"What did you mean about not meaning to happen?" she questioned after a few minutes. "Did you do something that pushed Simon?"

Me and my big mouth. "Well, I didn't push him," I hedged.

"But he fell," she said softly. "Did AJ push him?"

"No, no," I protested quickly. "It was... it was nothing."

Do you think you can trust her with me? Min asked cautiously.

"Sam, I hope you know that you can trust me with anything," Brenda told me.

"I am trusting you," I declared. "I've been talking to you about this."

"It seems as if you're hesitant about this," she stated kindly. "Is there something going on? Aside from AJ, aside from Simon, just you?"

I knew babbling on had been a bad idea. "I don't know," I whispered. "I don't want to seem crazy or anything." I knew I wasn't crazy, Min was real, but would Brenda believe that?

"Is there something going on?" she asked again. "Something that someone else might not understand?"

I couldn't stop a laugh. "Isn't that true about this whole situation?"

"I'm not talking about AJ or Simon," she said very seriously. "I'm talking about you. Are you going through something that you need help with?"

I'm all the help you need, Min reminded me. *You don't need anybody else.*

Hush, I told him. "Have you ever done something," I asked Brenda softly, "and not known how you did it?"

"Well..." she murmured, looking away.

When she didn't continue, I asked, "Is that a yes or a no?"

"There's been something I've been meaning to talk to you about," she said in a rush, standing to pace in front of the couch. "Something I've been meaning to tell you. I figured that since your brother and I are getting married that I should tell you the truth. I didn't mean to be deceitful in any way, but um, I figured it best because it would explain things more than I ever could."

Great, Min whispered. Now you've gotten her rambling.

"I am not the Mother," she told me firmly. "I was never the Mother. There are certain things about my life that are um, well, lets just say that there are certain abilities I have that are mother like, but I'm not the Mother...."

Since I'd figured that out months ago, I smiled. "Kinda like the whole making people like you on first sight thing?" I thought about that for a moment, then added, "Okay, adore you on first sight."

"Kinda. But it's not— God I hate this," she breathed. "This is not a situation that I'm comfortable with."

I hid a smile. "You have abilities that appear as if they're God-like but they're not."

"Exactly."

"Like making someone fall down steps without touching them," I added.

"Not exactly," she said slowly. "While they're both supernatural to an extent, they aren't the same types of gifts."

There was more than one type of... gift? "I see."

"And I want to be as honest with you as possible," she added hastily, "but there is a certain code that I have to live by. There are certain things about my life that I can't tell you. Certain things I can't say or I endanger you."

"Kinda like the Mafia," I murmured, studying her face.

"In a way." She seemed relieved to have the truth out. What could I do but follow suit?

"Can you—" I began, then stopped. "This may sound really weird, but do you hear voices? Or a voice?"

"I know that some people have that," she said carefully. "But that's not – there are a few people that I can talk to in my head but they are people that I can physically see and speak with. That is just a gift that I have that can be learned, to speak with someone that I know."

"This isn't a person," I told her.

She shook her head. "Then this is a different gift than I have."

"So this isn't—" I licked lips suddenly gone dry. "I'm not going crazy?"

What, you think I'm some figment of you're imagination? Min asked indignantly.

"I don't think so," she assured me. "I think you're a very special woman whose gifts are finally manifesting themselves."

"There's nothing special about me," I told her, looking away. "I'm just an average girl, living a less than average life."

"Mmm, no, I don't think so," she objected with a smile. "Let's see, how can I say this. Let me guess, you're probably Awakening, aren't you?"

I felt my face flush. "How do you know?"

"Let's just say that I've been doing some thinking and some studying," she explained.

"Something that you went through?" I knew there were different types of mages, and thought she might be one of the other traditions.

"Oh, no," she said firmly. "My gifts are of a totally different nature."

Way different, Min murmured.

"You are about to enter a world that runs parallel with the world that you have previously known," Brenda cautioned me. "Some might call it the world of darkness, some might consider it hell on earth, it all depends on how you look at it."

I smiled wryly. "Gee, this makes me feel much better."

"Well, you are at a crossroads," she told me. "You are gaining abilities now that while I don't know exactly what you'll be capable of because this is a path that I know little to nothing about, but you will have the ability to make a difference in this world."

"I can sense that," I admitted. "The voice keeps telling me that."

"I believe it is supposed to be your guide," she murmured thoughtfully.

"That's what he says," I agreed. I shook my head and smiled. "You know, he doesn't like Simon, and he does like AJ."

"Well, you know," she murmured, "Simon is a jerk and I'd like to be able to take care of that for you, but I don't want to make you think I don't trust your abilities."

"What do you mean take care of it?" I asked suspiciously.

"Make him go away so that he won't hurt you again," she told me.

That sounded very underhanded. "I hope that we've settled that already." I didn't want Simon killed just because he couldn't hold his temper.

"Yes," she agreed, "but I promise you that if something else happens, I will be forced to take care of it. I will not have him harming a member of my family." She looked at me meaningfully. "You are a member of my family in my eyes and that's totally aside from what your brother and I have."

"If he ever does anything like that again, Sam," Rafe said firmly from the dining room doorway, "we will definitely take care of him, one way or another." His voice was so cold and hard that I wouldn't have believed it was him if I hadn't been looking at him when he said it.

"I'm sure everything is taken care of," I protested again. "I'm sure there won't be any more problems and if there are I'll deal with it."

"No," Brenda said, meaning to reassure me, "you won't have to."

If he comes in the daylight, she won't have anything to do with it, Min commented in my mind.

I frowned, looking at Brenda. What did daylight have to do with her helping me? *What are you talking about?* I asked the Avatar. When he didn't answer, it occurred to me that I had never once seen Brenda before sundown. Also, I could see something different about her. The only way I could explain it was a total lack of life. But that just wasn't possible, was it?

"Are you allergic to the sun or something Brenda?" I asked her softly. "It just occurred to me that I've never seen you during the day."

She glanced at Rafe, then looked at me seriously. "You're getting dangerously close to something I can't tell you," she warned me. "For your protection."

I nodded and looked down. There was only one species that was thought to avoid the sun, but somehow I couldn't make myself believe that vampires were real. Even if I did, how could Brenda, warm loving Brenda, be one?

"Sam," Rafe said suddenly, "you know Corrine Wright, don't you?"

I blinked at the change of topic. "Yeah, she works at Mother Abigail's." Corrine was studying to become a psychologist, and volunteered at the center for the experience of working with troubled teens. We had class together on Monday nights.

"I have been asked to keep an eye on her while a friend of mine is out of town," Brenda told me.

"Keep an eye on her?" I asked, frowning. "What are you talking about? Is she in danger?"

"It's just to make sure that she's safe," Brenda assured me. "And I was wondering if you could help me do that, she doesn't know me, and I don't want to make her uneasy."

"What is it you want me to do?" I asked warily. "And what am I supposed to be keeping an eye out for?"

"Anybody strange," Brenda replied. "Anyone new in her life."

I remembered talking to Jared, the coven priest, earlier today. "You know it's weird that you would say that," I told her, "cause Jared mentioned something earlier today about going over to talk to her."

"Really?" She seemed surprised.

"Yeah, something about a friend of his asking him to go talk to her, not necessarily about joining the coven, but something along those lines." I couldn't remember exactly what he'd told me. "I guess they had a pretty good conversation because they talked for half the night. Nothing romantic or anything, but they talked about magic, I guess."

"It might be a good idea for you to talk to Jared as well," she suggested. "I have a feeling that he may hear voices as well." She glanced at the dining room doorway. "You can quit hanging in the doorway now."

"I brought the sodas," Rafe said suddenly. He came over to the couch and sat down, putting his arm around me.

"If you need to talk," Brenda offered to me, but I interrupted her.

"I know I can count on you. Although, next time I might ask you to leave Rafe at home," I added, glancing at my brother who was grinning unashamed.

Brenda smiled at him. "Well, you know, he's not so bad."

"Not all the time," I said with pretended reluctance as I hugged him. Regardless of how I hated it when he coddled me, I love my brother.

"How are you feeling?" Brenda asked. "Do you think that Simon isn't going to bother you anymore?"

I sobered, not liking the reminder of my ex-boyfriend. "I don't know," I said softly. "I mean, I'd like to stay positive about the whole thing and think that he's not coming back."

Brenda pulled out a business card with only a number printed on it and gave it to me. "If Simon shows up here, I want you to call me," she said sternly. "If he gives you any more problems—"

"I'm sure I could handle it," I told her.

"I'm sure you could too," she agreed, "but I don't think you have to deal with this."

"Brenda," I said with a firm shake of my head, "it is my problem."

"Yes, but this could be a nasty situation." She came over to the couch and sat down on the low table at my feet. "You are too sweet of a person to have to deal with this," she said as she took my hand. "I don't want you to be stained by his nastiness."

I couldn't stop the blush that crept over my face. "He's just a guy," I scoffed.

"Yeah, and guys can be assholes some times," she reminded me.

"True."

"Do you have any plans this evening?" She asked suddenly.

"Not really," I admitted. "I was just going to stay home and relax. Why?"

"I was just wondering." She shot a sidelong look at Rafe. "Do you want to hang out here for a while, I want to go talk to Jared and see what's shaking."

He gave her an even look. "Are you trying to get rid of me?"

"No," she said innocently. "I was just wondering if you wanted to spend some time with your sister, you know you don't see her a lot."

He looked at me and when I nodded, he smiled. "If you don't mind, but I don't want you to go off and have adventures without me, either."

She rolled her eyes. "I'm not going to get into any problems, masculine one."

"Uh, huh," he murmured, not convinced. "If you can promise me you'll stay out of trouble, then I'll stay here with Sam."

"I promise I'll do my best," she told him.

He leaned forward and gave her a brief kiss as he gave her his car keys. "If you need me, you have my number."

She stood and looked down at him. "You wanna walk me out?"

"Sure," he said, rising. "I'll be right back," he told me as they left the room.

EARSHOT

BUFFY: MY LIFE... HAPPENS TO, ON OCCASION, SUCK BEYOND THE TELLING OF IT, SOMETIMES MORE THAN I CAN HANDLE.

"I'm just going to go make a phone call," Rafe told me when he came back into the living room. "You'll wait right here?"

"What do you think I'm going to do?" I asked. "Listen?"

"You wouldn't do that, I'm sure," he said sheepishly. He bent and kissed my cheek, then walked through the dining room into the kitchen. He'd made such a big deal about it that I snuck down the hall until I was within earshot.

"We have to take care of her," I heard Rafe say into the phone. "You know how she's been since our parents died."

I didn't like that he was talking about me like that. I wasn't some helpless child anymore. I tiptoed into the bedroom and silently picked up the handset on my bed stand.

"Yeah, he's a creep all right," my cousin Brian was saying. "I'm just as glad she broke up with him. Maybe we should teach him a few lessons in good manners toward women."

"I quite agree," Rafe replied. "However, there are certain things that have to be taken care of first. I'd hate to end up in jail because of that asshole."

"Did you ever find out why AJ stayed with her last night?" Brian asked. "He wouldn't even talk to me about it. In fact, he got pissed off and left here in a fit a few minutes ago. What happened?"

"He slept with her," Rafe said. I wanted to punch him for his honesty.

Brian gave a low whistle. "Go Samantha," he said cheerfully. That made me feel a little better.

"Shut up," Rafe growled.

"Oh, big brother not liking that little sister is all grown up now?" There was a great deal of laughter in Brian's voice, and I couldn't help but smile.

"Yeah, well, I guess I'd rather picture her in bed with AJ than with Simon," Rafe admitted wryly. "I have no idea what she ever saw in him, but I'm glad it's over."

"Well, if you need me, let me know," Brian offered.

"Sure, cuz."

I hung the phone up softly and was back in the living room before Rafe knew I'd been gone. "Enjoy your conversation?" I asked him when he entered the room.

"Yeah," he replied, sitting down beside me on the couch. "I wanted to talk to you about last night, Sam."

I'd expected this to come earlier, but knew it would come sooner or later. It was best to just get it over and done with. "What about it?"

"Well, AJ doesn't exactly have the best reputation with women," he said slowly.

"I don't know why not," I said, suppressing a smile. "Everything works."

He shot me a look that made me wish I'd held my tongue. "That's kind of the problem," he told me. "He's a bit of a ladies man." He waited for me to say something, and when I didn't, he continued. "I just don't want to see you get hurt by him, Sam."

"Rafe, I don't expect anything permanent out of AJ," I told him honestly. "I know that he's only in town for a few weeks and then he'll go back to New York. It was only one night, anyway," I added. "Do you really think I'm going to fall apart when he goes home?"

He put his hand over mine. "You know that I try to take care of you now that I'm back in Salem," he began, but I interrupted him.

"Rafe, I don't need you to take care of me." I smiled to take the sting from my words. "You were gone a long time, and I grew up all by myself. I can deal with AJ, and I can deal with Simon. What I can't deal with is you being all protective."

He looked away, a guilty expression on his face. "Maybe I shouldn't have left," he said softly. "Maybe things would have been better if I'd stayed here and looked after you."

I sighed in frustration. "Next thing you're gonna say is that we should have moved to Iowa when you turned eighteen," I muttered.

He glanced up quickly. "Maybe we should have," he said hotly. "Maybe then you wouldn't have ended up with a loser like Simon."

"Who's to say it wouldn't have been worse?" I replied angrily. "Iowa is just an ideal, Rafe, it wouldn't have been real."

"It might have been," he protested sadly. "We'll never know."

"Do you remember the way mom and dad used to talk about Iowa?" I asked him softly, remembering the pain of our parent's deaths. We'd been planning on moving west when the car accident took their lives.

"Yeah," he replied with a sad smile. "I remember that after they died we talked about it that way, too. We used to think that life would be perfect in Iowa, and we swore we'd move there when I got old enough to take you."

I sighed and rubbed my temples. "Even now when I see something that I know would be absolutely perfect for me but that I can never have no matter how much I want it or how hard I try, I still find myself thinking 'that's it, that's Iowa.'" I laughed wryly at my foolishness. "It's funny how something like that from our childhood can come to mean something when you're an adult, isn't it?"

He smiled. "Sometimes I think the same thing," he admitted. "The first time I looked at Brenda and realized what she wa—" he stopped in mid sentence and changed what he was going to say. "—what she would mean to me, I said to myself, 'she's it, she's my Iowa.' I didn't think I'd ever be able to get this close to her, Sam. I understand what you mean completely."

Suddenly a thought seemed to occur to him and he frowned. "Simon's not your Iowa, is he?" Rafe asked almost fearfully.

I laughed at the idea. "No, Rafe," I assured him quite honestly. "Simon's not my Iowa."

What about AJ? Min asked slyly.

Hush, I ordered him silently as I turned on the television to distract my brother. We caught the beginning of a science fiction film we'd both wanted to see, and kept our conversation on the movie until it was over.

Thankfully Brenda returned while the credits were rolling. Rafe jumped up to get the door before I could so much as move.

"Brenda, did everything go okay?" he demanded the minute she walked in.

"Everything is fine," she told him, reaching up to give him a quick kiss. "Have you guys been behaving yourselves?"

As she joined me on the couch, I replied, "Yeah, we turned a movie on, that way we didn't have to talk about Rafe's over-protectiveness. It worked."

She smiled knowingly at Rafe, then turned to me, an apprehensive look on her face. "So, Sam, how would you like to stay at Brian's house for a few days?"

I looked at her in disbelief for several minutes, then suppressed a sigh. "Rafe, how would you like to go get me a soda?" I asked him softly. "From the store?"

He looked confused. "Why?"

"Because your ears are too big," I told him.

Brenda tossed him his keys and added, "I think we need dog food too."

"Fine," he said, throwing his hands up in mock surrender. "I can tell when I'm not wanted."

He gave us both a kiss on the cheek and left us alone.

I waited until he pulled out of the driveway before I looked back at Brenda. "I am not going to stay at Brian's."

"Honey, I don't mean to—"

"I'm not going to do it," I told her firmly, refusing to let her try and talk me into it.

"Will you hear me out first?"

I shook my head. "I do not want to push myself into AJ's life and that's what it will be doing." Before she could say anything else, I added, "I'm not going to come stay with you either."

"Sam," she said pleadingly, "I have found out some things tonight that make me very leery of Simon and I am afraid for you. Okay?" I looked at her in surprise; I'd never heard her plead for anything. "This is nothing about Rafe being overprotective, this is nothing like that."

"Then what?" I asked softly.

"Oh, he's involved in some very bad shit," she told me.

"What are you talking," I asked, confused. "Drugs? Guns?" Simon had never been into that kind of thing before, but lately he'd changed.

"Worse," she replied.

My eyebrows shot up. "Worse than drugs and guns? What could be worse?"

"Well, let's see," she murmured. "How can I put this? Mafioso-ish."

That was something I never would have expected. You would think the Mob would have better taste than to pick up someone like Simon. "He's involved with the Mafia?"

"In a way," she confirmed. "He's involved with forces that I would be crushed if you had to deal with. Have you noticed anything odd about him for the last, oh, let's say month or so? Has he been more aggressive? More likely to get into fights?"

"Yeah," I replied, wondering how she knew that. "He's been more irritable."

"A little more physical?" she suggested.

I flushed with shame. "It depends what you mean by that. He hasn't been around much, but he's been a little rough. But he hasn't... we haven't... in a long time. Not that I've minded much."

"Hmm, I wonder," she said almost to herself. Then she looked back at me. "I don't want to impede upon your freedom, or your independence, this has nothing to do with that. This has to do with your safety, plain and simple."

"Okay, so he's involved with the Mafia," I conceded. "What does that have to do with me?"

"I'm afraid he'll come back here and try to hurt you, Sam," she told me. "I don't want that to happen."

I was saved from answering when the doorbell rang. Brenda motioned me to stay in the living room while she approached the door with one hand in her jacket. Abruptly I realized that she was carrying a gun and I stopped to stare at her. This was serious, dead serious.

Simon was dangerous and Brenda fully expected him to come back for me. I leaned against the doorway, weak with fear.

This is serious, Min told me needlessly. *Maybe you should stay with Brian. It's just a bit of luck that AJ's staying there too.*

After checking through the window, Brenda opened the door and let AJ in. I don't know which of them was more surprised.

"Brenda," AJ said haltingly. "I didn't see your car, is Rafe with you?"

"He's at the store," she told him.

He visibly relaxed and I shook my head. What did he think Rafe was going to do?

"AJ," I said softly, straightening from the wall.

He smiled and my breath caught in my throat. "Hey," he replied. "I just stopped by to make sure you were all right, I didn't expect you to have company."

"Actually, maybe you could help," Brenda told him.

Excellent, Min crowed. I groaned softly.

"I'm trying to talk Sam into staying with Brian for a few days," she continued. "I'm worried that Simon will come back and try to hurt her."

AJ looked very concerned. "Then she should stay with Brian. I could take her over there with me right now, I know he won't mind."

Brenda smiled. "Great! She just needs to grab a few things and she'll be ready."

I stepped forward. "Hello," I said impatiently. "I'm right here, you can stop talking around me like I don't exist. And I never agreed to go to Brian's."

"Well, you can't stay here," Brenda told me. "Even if AJ stayed with you again, you wouldn't want to put him in danger, would you?"

After closing my eyes briefly, I shot her a hard look. "You don't play fair, do you?" I demanded coldly.

She smiled a sweet smile. "Not when your safety is a stake," she told me firmly.

I threw up my hands in defeat. "Fine." I stalked between the two of them into the den where I grabbed up the phone to call Brian.

"Hey," he said pleasantly. "What's up?"

His tone irritated me further, but I was able to keep it out of my voice. "I was wondering if I could come stay with you for a few days," I said hesitantly. "Brenda and Rafe are being all overprotective about Simon and what happened—"

"Say no more," he interrupted, sounding entirely too happy about it. "Come over right now, I'll have a room ready for you. Do you need me to come get you?"

"No, I do know how to drive," I reminded him. "I have to grab a few things and wait for Rafe to come back for Brenda, but I'll be over soon."

"Great. I'll have everything ready," he told me.

I knew he would, Brian was someone I could always count on to be there for me. It occurred to me that I wouldn't have to be alone with AJ as long as Brian was there, and I breathed a sigh of relief as I replaced the handset.

SCHOOL HARD

SPIKE: I WAS RASH, AND IF I HAD TO DO IT ALL OVER AGAIN.... OH, WHO AM I KIDDING? I WOULD DO IT EXACTLY THE SAME.

I turned and walked into the bedroom, thinking the footsteps I heard following me were Brenda's. When I bent to pull a suitcase out from under the bed, a large masculine hand took it from me and laid it on the bench at the foot of the bed.

"Why are you so against staying at Brian's?" AJ asked, turning to look at me.

"What are you doing?" I shot back, surprised that he had followed me.

He shrugged. "I wanted to talk to you without Brenda standing over you like a mother hen," he told me.

I chuckled a little and turned toward the dresser. "She's always mothering someone," I told him.

"Why don't you want to stay at Brian's?" he repeated. "I thought you liked him."

"I do like him." I reached into one of the bottom drawers and pulled out several pairs of jeans. I had to grab some older things with the new; I hadn't bought enough to ensure a total change of wardrobe. I'd have to ask Brenda if she would go shopping with me again.

"Then why are you so against staying with him?" He walked over to lean a hip on the dresser.

I looked at him as I stood up. "How would you like it if an ex-girlfriend of yours ran you out of your house?" I bit out, angry that Simon was doing this to me. "How would you feel if your family refused to let you stay in your own house alone?"

"Don't you have someone who could stay with you?" He watched me put the things I'd gathered in the suitcase, then go back to the dresser for more.

I shrugged. "Rachel lives next door, but she's got her uncle staying with her and I couldn't ask her to leave him. She always complains that he never spends enough time with her. I really don't want to bring everyone I know in on this." My voice dropped to almost a whisper. "I don't want everyone to know that they were right about Simon. I feel stupid enough as it is."

I was looking down into a drawer and AJ surprised me by putting a finger under my chin and raising my face to his.

"You don't have anything to feel stupid about, Sam," he said, his voice husky. "You thought you knew him and you didn't. That's certainly no sin."

"I guess," I replied softly. "But now I feel like everyone is trying to wrap me in cotton and put me back on a shelf."

"What do you mean?" he asked, frowning.

I backed away and put more clothes in the suitcase. "When Rafe left for New York to go to college, he left behind a ten year old little girl with Uncle Alec," I explained. "When he came home on holidays, he never admitted that I was growing up. It's like he packed me in cotton and expected me to stay there until he was ready for me to be an adult. Now he's had to face quite clearly that I'm not ten years old anymore. I don't think he's ready for it. He keeps trying to pack me up and put me back away."

"I'm sure that he's not doing it intentionally," AJ protested.

"Maybe not, but I'm almost twenty years old," I told him. "I know that's not a great age and that I'm certainly not full of wisdom, but I am old enough to fend for myself."

"But you don't have to," he told me. "That's the benefit of having family and friends that care about you. From what Brenda says, Simon's in some serious business. And he's hurt you already, Sam, have you forgotten about that? What happens when he comes back and you're alone? Brenda got a call a minute ago that said he's headed toward this part of town."

I found myself rubbing my upper arms where the bruises were a constant reminder of Simon's temper. I sat down carefully on the bench next to the suitcases, for the first time thinking what would happen if Simon really did come back. My hands started to shake.

AJ crossed the room to crouch in front of me. "You never believed he'd come back did you?" he asked softly. "Why?"

"I'm not stupid," I whispered angrily. "I know what I am and what I'm not. Why would he go through all the trouble to get me back? I'm not anyone special."

He chuckled and cupped his hand on the side of my face, his thumb tracing my lips. "You're more special than you know, Sam."

"Why?" I demanded. "He hasn't even been around much the last month. It's not like I'm some diva in bed or anything. You know that."

His hand dropped away and irritation showed plainly on his face. I couldn't stop the surge of fear I felt at AJ's reaction and I dropped my eyes to hide it from him.

"That was harsh, Samantha," AJ scolded, "both for me and yourself. It takes more than sex to make a person special, you should know that. And I don't regret last night, I thought it was wonderful."

"I'm sorry," I whispered, knowing he was right. "It was wonderful."

I told myself that he wouldn't hurt me, but once again my self wasn't listening. When AJ raised his hand to touch my cheek, I couldn't stop from instinctively moving back from it. My startled gaze met his, and I watched sadness pool in his brown eyes.

"I wouldn't hurt you, Sam," he breathed softly. "Not for anything."

Not intentionally, I thought to myself. I knew he would hurt me when he went back to New York, and the more time I spent with him, the harder it would be. "I know," I told him. I laid my hand on his cheek. "I'm just jumpy, I'm sorry."

He smiled and leaned forward to kiss my cheek. "Get your stuff together," he prompted. "I'll take you to Brian's and we can talk more there."

"Okay," I replied. He moved back and I quickly finished packing while he looked around the room. While the bedroom was clean, I worried what the things in the room would tell him about me. For instance, what would he think of the stuffed owl on the bed? Or the poster of Iowa University on the wall?

He didn't say anything, though, and within a few minutes I had a bag packed. He carried it into the foyer for me, where Brenda and Rafe were waiting for us. A few minutes later AJ pulled his car onto the road and drove toward Brian's house.

"I'm sure Brenda and Rafe will get everything straightened out soon," he told me after a few minutes.

"Probably, but I don't understand what it is that Simon is involved in," I replied.

Something bad, Min whispered.

What? I asked, but he didn't answer.

"At least you'll be safe tonight," AJ said firmly.

"Yeah, with two big burly guys to protect me," I teased softly.

He smiled and we rode the rest of the short distance to Brian's in a comfortable silence. AJ carried my bag inside, and Brian met us at the door on his way out.

"I'm really sorry about this, Sam," he told me with a kiss on my cheek. "The Boston store was broken into and they can't get a hold of any of the managers. I have to go, but I'll be back in a couple of hours."

"We'll be fine," AJ assured him.

"Do you want me to call Rafe?" Brian asked me.

"Absolutely not," I told him. I didn't think I could take any more of the big brother testosterone tonight. "We'll be fine."

Within minutes, Brian was gone and AJ was following me upstairs to one of the spare rooms. He sat my bag on the bed and stood looking at me.

"Are you sure you don't want to call Rafe?" he asked. "You were supposed to have two burly men here, not just one."

"I don't think Simon's going to come after me," I replied with a smile. "I'm sure we'll be all right. I'll just go to bed, I don't want to interfere in whatever you were planning on doing."

He glanced at the bed, then looked at me, his brown eyes smoldering with desire. I felt warm and cold at the same time, my body responding instantly to the expression on his face. He took a step closer to me and stopped. "This could go places," he warned me.

I found myself standing close to him with my hand on his chest. "At least it wouldn't have far to go," I told him, gesturing toward the bed.

He put his arms around me and pulled me close for an earth-shattering kiss. Our tongues mated wildly and I heard him moan low in his throat. I fumbled for the buttons of his shirt and impatiently he pulled it over his head. His hands pushed the fabric of my blouse up until my shirt joined his on the floor at our feet.

We kissed again, although no words can express the feelings our kiss evoked in me. It was as if the sun had chosen to rise in AJ, and I was warmed by its caress. His hands unfastened my bra and pulled it down my arms before dropping it to the floor.

Minutes later we were naked and lying on top of the bed. His skin was warm and his hands were gentle on my body. Everywhere he touched me, fire erupted and I found myself begging him to come inside of me. When he finally did, the world exploded.

He started moving slowly at first, a gentle rocking motion that soon consumed my consciousness. When he began to move faster, I matched his movements perfectly. Time seemed to stand still, yet stretch out to eternity as we made love.

Then once more the world shattered, and I swear I saw stars shining down on us as we quieted, waiting for our hearts to stop racing, our blood to cool.

After a time, AJ sat up and covered us both with the blanket at the foot of the bed. He cradled me against his chest and I fell asleep breathing in his unique scent.

I woke up I don't know how much later to the phone ringing. I was barely able to keep the sleep from my voice as I answered.

"Samantha?" I heard a familiar voice say.

"Brenda," I replied wryly. "Checking up on me already?"

She chuckled. "I was just calling to see how you were, and I didn't think that you would appreciate someone just stopping by."

I sat up on the bed, pulling the sheet with me. "I can just see Rafe doing that," I murmured softly. "I'm fine. Brian was called into Boston, but I'm snug as a bug in a rug." Or at least I had been until she called. I got up and walked over to the window seat, hoping that I wouldn't wake AJ.

"Oh, well maybe I should just let you go then," Brenda replied.

"For what?" I asked, crossing my fingers. "We're sitting here watching TV."

"Okay. I just wanted to make sure everything was okay," she said. "I can say that you could probably go home tomorrow if you want to."

"Why wouldn't I?" I demanded softly. "Do you know something I don't? Can I go home tonight?"

"No," she said quickly. "You're already there, I wouldn't worry about it. Everything should be okay. You shouldn't have to worry about Simon anymore."

I frowned. "Then why can't I go home tonight?"

"You're already there," she reminded me, "and it's late now, why would you want to?"

"Have you ever heard the term awkward silence?" AJ and I hadn't had any yet this evening, but I was afraid of what would happen if he woke up.

"Have you ever heard the phrase taking the bull by the balls?" she replied, amused.

Frankly, I was surprised. "Are you suggesting what I think you're suggesting?"

"I'm suggesting you do whatever makes you happy," she told me.

I closed my eyes at the visions that prompted in my head. "So I can go home?"

"Except that. Is spending time with AJ killing you that much?" She sounded like she was having second thoughts about throwing us together.

"It's um," I began, wanting to lie to her. In the end though, I couldn't. "No, it's not. He's ah..."

"Sitting right next to you?" she goaded me.

"No, no," I replied. "But, Brenda—"

"Sam?" AJ murmured sleepily from the bed.

"What?" Brenda prompted in my ear.

I wasn't really listening to her. "I'll go home in the morning," I murmured quietly. "I'm missing the movie, so..."

"Right," she replied. "You have a pleasant evening, enjoy yourself. I'll check with you later."

"Okay. Bye," I said distantly, hanging up the phone.

"Sam?" AJ repeated.

"Right here," I replied softly.

"Who were you talking to?" he asked as I climbed back into bed beside him.

"Brenda," I told him. "She was checking up on me."

He pulled me down on his chest, apparently now wide-awake. "What did you tell her?"

"I said we were watching a movie," I said, laying my head on his shoulder.

"A movie," he said softly. "What's it about? Just so I know if she asks."

I smiled against his skin. "I think the main characters end up in bed together," I whispered.

He chuckled. "What do they do there?"

"Why don't you show me?" I suggested.

He did.

BEWITCHED, BOTHERED AND BEWILDERED

XANDER: SO, WHAT DO YOU THINK?

BUFFY: IT'S NICE.

The next morning I woke to a knock at the door and found myself still in bed with AJ. His arms tightened around me for a moment, then he sighed.

"Do you want me to get that?" he asked very softly.

We both knew it had to be Brian. I sat up and grabbed for the robe at the foot of the bed. "I'll get it."

I tied the belt of the robe, then opened the door a crack just as the knocking came again. I ran a hand through my tangled hair. "What is it, Brian?"

He took in my bedraggled appearance at a glance. "Didn't you sleep well?" he asked.

I suppressed a smile, remembering just how little sleep I'd actually gotten. "It's early, Brian. Did you want something?"

"Yeah, I was wondering if you'd seen AJ," he said, looking amused. "We were supposed to drive down to Boston this morning, but he's not in his room. He didn't leave you alone here last night, did he?"

I heard movement behind me, but didn't turn to look. "No, he was here." I felt a hand on my arm and knew that AJ was asking if I wanted Brian to know he was in my room. I glanced at AJ to make sure he was decent, then opened the door further and stepped back to let Brian in.

My cousin took a step in and saw AJ standing only a few feet behind me. He glanced back at me, then grinned at his friend. "Hey," he said after a moment. "Are we still on for Boston?"

AJ glanced at me, and I looked at the clock. No wonder Brian had thought it was funny when I'd told him it was early; it was more than half past nine.

"Damn," I whispered, walking quickly to where I'd left my bag on the floor.

"What is it?" AJ asked.

"I have class in twenty minutes," I told them, taking clothes from the bag and turning. "Look guys, I'm in a big hurry. Do you mind?" It would take me at least half an hour to drive to Boston. I was going to be late no matter what way I looked at it, but I didn't want to be too late.

"Not a problem," Brian said as he shot one last grin at AJ and left the room, closing the door behind him.

AJ sat down on the edge of the bed as I took off the robe and began to dress. "So you're going to be busy today?"

"Yeah, actually," I replied as I pulled on my jeans. "I have class until one, then I have to work from two until five." I found a brush in the bag and started brushing my hair out. "Sounds like you and Brian are busy, too."

"I wanted to see some of the campuses in Boston," AJ admitted. "I thought I might use one in a scene I had planned. You go to Boston College, right?"

"Yeah," I said as I sat down beside him to put my shoes on. "Alec set up a trust fund from my parents' estate to make sure Rafe and I went to college, but you probably knew that, didn't you."

"I did," he agreed, putting his hand on my lower back. "I wish you could go with us today, you probably know the campus a lot better than Brian."

"You'd be surprised," I told him as I straightened. "Brian has dated a lot of college girls."

"Would you like to go out tonight?" he asked suddenly. "D'abolique is having karaoke tonight and us guys used to do a mean quartet."

"You want me to go with you guys?" I asked softly, surprised. "Brian and Rafe and, I'm assuming, Brenda?" She was never very far from my brother's side, except during the day.

"Yeah," he replied. "You had fun when we went a few days ago. Unless you've had enough of me."

Like that would happen. "I'd like to go," I whispered, looking up at him. Then I remembered the ritual. "I have a ritual this afternoon at sundown, AJ. It should be over by seven."

He seemed interested in that. "A ritual?"

"Yeah. It's a protection spell Rachael wants to perform," I told him. "You could come if you want, I know no one will mind."

"I'd like that," he said, looking at me intently. He lowered his head to kiss me very gently. I closed my eyes, feeling desire warm my body. Abruptly I pulled away and stood.

"Look, as interesting as this could get," I said, shooting for a stern tone, "I really have to get to class." I threw my stuff into my bag and headed for the door.

I think he's coming around nicely, Min put in. *Asking you to join him and his friends on a night on the town.*

My brother is one of his friends, I reminded the Avatar. *And he doesn't like the fact that I'm sleeping with AJ.*

Then why are you?

"Sam," AJ called after me.

I turned around to look at him expectantly.

"We came here in my car," he reminded me as he pulled on his shirt. "Hold on, I'll give you a ride home."

I smiled at my forgetfulness. "Thanks," I told him.

On the way to my house, we arranged for him to meet me there at five thirty. He dropped me off with a kiss and a few minutes later I was on my way to college. I found that I couldn't concentrate much in class, all I could think about was AJ. I kept watching for them on campus, but I never saw them.

I got to work a few minutes early and ate a sandwich in the café. Saturdays are usually busy and today was no exception. A little after three I looked up to see Corrine Wright coming toward me.

"Can I help you find something?" I asked with a smile.

"No, I'm just taking a look around," she replied. "I'm supposed to meet a friend here."

"Oh." I glanced at her as I put a book on the shelf. "Any ill effects from last Friday?"

"No, I'm fine," she replied. "How about you?"

"I'm all right. It was kind of freaky, though," I said, reaching for another book.

"I know what you mean. You heard that the place is still closed down, didn't you?" she asked. "I think it will be another week before it opens back up."

"Yeah, I heard." I wondered where the girls were staying while everything was getting cleaned up.

She's like you now, Min whispered in my head.

What do you mean? I asked him.

She's Awakened.

There had to be a way to say this without being wicked obvious. "Have you had any other strange stuff going on since the attack?"

"A few things," she said hesitantly.

I smiled. "Me too. I thought about asking Rachael to help me with them."

"Really?" she asked. "I'd heard that Rachael has... abilities. Jared Smith has been helping me."

Jared was the Priest of the Black Rose Coven. I thought about mentioning the ritual we were doing tonight, but I was already bringing one guest. If Jared thought Corrine should come, he'd bring her.

Brian walked in from the back room and Corrine watched him for a moment. "The manager here seems really nice," she said softly.

I shrugged. "Yeah, I guess."

"You don't like him?" For some reason she seemed surprised.

"Yeah, I like him," I told her. "He's just a little too overprotective, although he's not as bad as my brother." When she gave me a funny look, I added, "He's my cousin."

An expression of relief crossed her face that she quickly hid. "Oh, I didn't know that," she murmured. "I thought you were dating."

"Oh, no," I assured her. Even if we weren't related, Brian just wasn't my type.

Jared came in the store right about then, looking around.

"Look, why don't you give me a call?" I suggested. "We can talk more about the abilities we're discovering." I wrote my number down on a slip of paper and handed it to her.

"That would be great," she told me. She gave me hers too, then excused her self and went to meet Jared.

The rest of the day went pretty quickly. I got home with just enough time to change into my ceremonial garb before AJ got there. I'd called Rachael earlier in the day and she didn't have a problem with AJ coming. In fact, she was pleased I'd invited him.

When he pulled in the drive, I walked out onto the porch to meet him. We walked next door to Rachael's where everyone was waiting for us. I introduced him to everyone, and to my surprise he didn't get irritated at all when everyone wanted his autograph. He talked and joked with my friends as if he'd known them forever.

About ten minutes before sundown, Rachael herded us all into the back yard. She had AJ stand on the deck where he was a little above us all and could see what everyone was doing, then she led us in raising the circle.

It wasn't easy to put AJ out of my mind, but somehow I managed to get lost in the familiar ritual. Min had been silent most of the afternoon, but when the ritual began he started correcting my pronunciation and gestures. I followed his instructions without even thinking and I could feel the magic flowing through the circle and the coven like I never had before. It was invigorating.

When the ceremony was over I caught Rachael looking at me speculatively. She led us onto the deck where the usual food and drink was waiting for us, then asked me to go into the kitchen with her.

"What's going on?" she demanded when we were alone.

I blinked and tried to pretend confusion. "What do you mean?"

She frowned and put her hands on my shoulders. "You know what I mean, Sam. I can see your Avatar hovering around your head. When did it happen?"

I looked at her in surprise. "You can see him?"

"I can," she told me with a smile. "But then I'm good at seeing them. When did it happen?"

"Last week," I admitted. "At Mother Abigail's."

"Oh, Sam," she murmured as she pulled me into her arms. "Was it horrible?"

I put my arms around her and laid my head on her shoulder. "I don't remember," I told her. "Min says I don't want to remember so I haven't even tried."

"That's good," she replied soothingly. "It was pretty intense. Has he told you what Tradition?"

I pulled back and looked at her in real confusion this time. "Tradition?" That was something I hadn't even thought about.

Verbena, Min whispered in my head. *Same as she is. We've known her before.*

Before? I asked.

In another life.

"Verbena?" I said hesitantly. "Min says Verbena. Is that what you are?"

"Yes," she confirmed with a smile. "Have you told anyone? Have you found a mentor?"

"Do I need one?" I asked. I'd thought about asking Rachael to help me, but I didn't want to impose myself on her life.

Yes, Min told me.

"Yes," Rachael replied at the same time. "I could teach you, if you'd like."

I smiled. "I'd like," I said honestly. "Thank you."

She hugged me again and we rejoined the others on the deck.

AJ had some very interesting questions to ask of the group in general and Rachael in particular. We spent about an hour with the coven before leaving to go to D'abolique.

It was a lot of fun watching the guys get up on stage and sing. I'd known Rafe could sing, but I hadn't realized how just how well. I had a great time, especially after AJ came home with me.

I spent the entire day Sunday with AJ. We woke up together just after dawn and had breakfast in the garden. Rachael came over for a little while that morning, and between the two of us we managed to answer all the questions AJ could come up with about witchcraft in Salem without mentioning Awakenings.

Close to noon, AJ and I went and had lunch at a little restaurant on the wharf. The food was good and the atmosphere was typical New England. Afterward we wandered downtown for a little while, even stopped in to see my Uncle Alec at his bookstore. We got back to my house a little after three and retired to the bedroom for a nap, more or less. Okay, so it was more, but we did manage to sleep a little.

Brian came over for dinner and we ordered pizza from a nearby restaurant. It felt a little strange to have my cousin and my lover over at the same time, Brian had never liked Simon and had always left if he showed up.

We watched a movie and talked until almost midnight, then Brian went home leaving me alone with AJ.

A few days later the sound of the phone ringing cut through my concentration like a knife. I breathed an irritated sigh and reached blindly for the phone. How the hell could I get my homework done if people kept calling me?

"Hello?" I said, still trying to concentrate on my work.

"Samantha, how are you?" a deep voice asked.

I blinked in surprise to hear AJ's voice. "I'm fine," I replied. "What's up?"

"Well, I was hoping that I hadn't done anything wrong last night," he said softly.

"No," I assured him. "Why would you think you had?"

"You were gone when I woke up this morning," he reminded me.

He had been sleeping when I'd left the house this morning, a fact that I had been grateful of. Even after a week of sleeping with him, I still didn't know what to say in the morning. "I had an early class," I told him. "I didn't get back from Boston until about an hour ago."

"Well, are you going to be busy tonight?"

AJ wanting to be around was something that I could get used to. I knew I should tell him I was busy, but I really wanted to see him again. "No, just doing some homework," I said smiling. "I should be done in about an hour." A glance at the clock showed that it was a little after four.

"Would you mind if I came by?" he asked. "I thought we could talk some more about witches and Salem history."

"You're not getting bored with the subject yet?" I asked, but the subject wasn't what I was asking about.

"It's very fascinating," he answered. "I find it hard to believe I'd ever get bored with it."

I felt a thrill at his words, hoping that he was referring to the same thing I had been: me. "If you'd like to learn more," I offered, "why don't you come by around six-thirty. I should be done by then."

"Great," he said, sounding very much like he meant it. "I'd like to take you out to dinner, if you don't mind. Chinese."

"That sounds good," I said, trying to be nonchalant about the whole thing. I knew that AJ planned on leaving some time next week, and I didn't want to think about what my life would be like when he was gone.

We rang off and I spent the next hour finishing my homework. After that, I took a quick shower and put on a little make up. I was ready entirely too early, so I decided to take a walk down to the park that was only a few blocks away. It would give me a chance to think about where this whole thing with AJ was going.

When I got to the park it was very quiet, nearly deserted. I watched the sun go down through the trees and wondered how long I'd loved AJ. Had I fallen in love with him when I'd read his novels? Or had it been the first moment I'd seen him at the bookstore? I wasn't sure, but one thing I did know; I loved him long before he'd spent the night with me.

He made me feel smart and special, but most of all he made me feel like a woman. I knew he found me attractive, it was obvious by what happened every time we were alone together. I knew that Brenda's makeover was the reason for his ardor, but I could only thank her for it.

I sat down on a park bench and listened to the sounds all around me. When we got back from dinner, I'd light some candles and the fireplace, despite the heat. I didn't think AJ would mind the setting.

Then I stopped my torrid thoughts. What if that's not what he wanted? What if he wanted to let me down easy, tell me that it had all been a mistake?

Easy, girl, Min advised. Given the way he looks at you, I seriously doubt that he'd do that.

Remembering AJ's warm gaze on me, I had to agree with Min. I didn't know why AJ wanted to take me out, but I knew one thing; if I didn't get off my butt and get back home, I'd miss him and always be in the dark about his motivations.

Storm coming in, Min commented. Looks like a big one. Good thing you have lots of candles.

The air turned cool and I felt the first rain drops on my arm. Time to go home before I got soaked. I walked back to the house quickly, getting onto the porch just as the first bolt of lightning danced across the sky.

I quickly repaired what little damage the rain had caused to my hair and makeup before I took out some candles in preparation for later.

NIGHTMARES

WILLOW: I'M NOT AFRAID. YOU'D THINK I'D BE AFRAID, BUT I'M NOT.

AJ was right on time, as usual. He helped me put my jacket on and held the umbrella as I got into the car. We talked quietly while he drove through the streets of Salem, or we did until my Avatar spoke up.

Sam, Min said carefully just as AJ turned a corner, we have a problem.

I froze at the urgency in his voice. *What?*

Do you see the car behind us? he asked. When I looked back through the rain, he added, *Simon's in it.*

I could feel panic rising inside of me. *But I thought—*

Somehow he got away, Min told me. Don't get hysterical on me. You have to warn AJ. Listen to me and we'll get out of this one, I promise.

"AJ," I said urgently, "we're being followed."

He glanced in the rear view mirror. "How can you tell?"

"It's Simon."

At that he shot me a questioning look. "I thought Brenda said that he was taken care of?"

"Yeah, well, apparently he isn't," I told him. "We have to lose him."

I watched in tense silence as AJ tried to lose the car, at first almost nonchalantly, then when he realized we really were being followed, more earnestly. Soon we were moving through the streets of Salem at speeds that made me glad we were wearing our seat belts.

Then Simon decided to play dirty. He accelerated quickly and hit AJ's car in the rear, throwing us forward in our seats.

"Hold on," AJ ordered, his voice sounding very pissed. He made a hard right and we slid on the wet pavement, but Simon just kept coming.

Then he hit us again, harder this time. The car started to skid and I could tell the exact moment AJ lost control of the car. The world spun and rolled as the car went airborne. Long seconds later we hit the ground with a loud crash and I felt the airbag hit my face hard. We skidded along the ground until the car hit something big enough to stop us and I blacked out for I'm not sure how long. I came back to the sound of Min's voice screaming in my head.

Sam, wake up, he ordered. You have to wake up, now!

I rolled my head to the left and opened my eyes. AJ was slouched in his seat, blood running down the side of his face from a cut on his temple.

"Oh Goddess," I breathed. "AJ!" I released my seat belt and took his face in my hands. He was groggy, mostly out of it, but the cut on his temple seemed to be the worst of his injuries. He just needed a little bit of time to come around.

He won't get it if you don't get out of here, Min told me.

"What do you mean?" I demanded.

Simon ran your car into a telephone pole, Min reminded me harshly. Do you think he wants to go for tea? He's coming after you and he'll hurt AJ if you let him. If you don't get away, they'll hurt him, Sam. Bad.

That was enough to get me moving. I fumbled with the seat belt, but I couldn't seem to get it opened.

He's coming, Min warned. If he finds you with AJ, he'll kill him.

The seat belt finally came loose but it was too late, Simon was already there. The remaining glass in the window shattered onto my lap and I screamed as he grabbed my hair and pulled me out of the window.

"Got you, bitch," he said smugly.

I tried to fight him, but I was dizzy and he was so much stronger than I was. He threw me back against the car and held a gun to my throat.

"Stop fighting, Sam," he told me. "Don't make this worse than it has to be."

With that he backhanded me across the face and I fell to the pavement, skinning my arm and hitting my head. He grabbed me by my arm and dragged me to my feet, then headed for the other car. There was blood running down the side of my face and I tried to wipe it away so I could look around for a chance to escape. The rain was coming down so hard I could hardly see more than a few feet from the car.

Goddess, I thought frantically, what can I do?

Run, the Avatar told me. Lead Simon away from the car, he'll come after you.

When Simon reached for the car door, I elbowed him in the stomach. Apparently that was the last thing he expected me to do. He doubled over and I pushed his head into the side of the car. I turned and ran without another thought. It was hard because I couldn't see very well, blood kept running into my eyes.

That's it, Min encouraged. Just keep running. Now, when you get on the other side of those bushes, turn left.

Min had never let me down yet, so I decided to take him at his word and keep running as fast as I could. I didn't know where I was going, but I knew that if anyone could get me away from Simon, Min could.

Go right, he yelled in my head, behind that tree and stop.

I did as he ordered, trying to slow my breathing so Simon couldn't hear me gasping for air. I waited, listening. After a few minutes, I heard footsteps on the path that stopped close to where I had left it.

Bloody hell, Min cursed. Run, girl, now! She would have to have Auspex, wouldn't she?

Who are you talking about? I asked as I darted into someone's back yard. There was no car in the drive and all the lights were off so I knew I wouldn't get any help there. *And what the hell is Auspex?*

Time enough for lessons later, he said simply. She's closing, go left.

I made a hard turn left and sprinted for the next yard, ducking under branches and around bushes. After several minutes, I realized that I'd lost my pursuer.

Stop and rest now, Min instructed. Stay alert, though. We're not through with this yet.

The grass was cold and wet beneath me as I collapsed under a bush. I tried to listen for Simon or the woman who was with him, but I couldn't hear anything over the pounding of my heart.

What could Simon possibly want with me? I'd told him I didn't love him. He knew I'd slept with AJ. I didn't understand why he would bother to come after me, especially if he had a woman with him already, as Min seemed to believe.

Sneaky bastard, Min said softly. Don't move, Sam. He's right close now.

"Samantha," I heard Simon whisper from nearby. "Come out, babe, I won't hurt you."

Remember how you tripped Simon on the porch? the Avatar asked.

I do. I tried it, but nothing happened.

"Come on, Samantha, I have someone I want you to meet." I sensed more than saw Simon crouch down near the bush. He put his hand out toward me and I instinctively shrank away from him, giving away my location.

"She's here," he said loudly.

"Grab her," a woman commanded him.

"Fuck that," I whispered.

Blood, Min said suddenly.

What? I demanded, almost hysterical from fright.

Blood is your focus, he told me. *Concentrate on the blood.*

I almost laughed at the order, and bit my lip to stop the sound from escaping. Then I followed Min's advice. I bit harder and concentrated on the blood in my mouth and the direction that the woman had spoken from. Min chuckled when we heard her stumble and fall to the ground and in an instant I was on my feet, running past her.

"Samantha!" Simon yelled. I closed my eyes for a moment, still running full out, and behind me I heard him fall to the ground.

I ducked branches and jump a low fence between two yards. I was going to make it! I was going to get away from them!

The next thing I knew something big hit me from behind and I went flying to the ground. I twisted out from under the weight and scrambled to get away, but a hand grabbed my ankle. I kicked hard at where I thought the face would be and was rewarded when I heard a grunt.

Run! Min cried. I did.

There's something you can do to get out of this, he said as I darted away from my pursuer. *Concentrate on the blood on your face and picture yourself somewhere else.*

That's all I have to do? I demanded silently. *Why didn't you tell me that earlier?* I concentrated on the car, knowing I had to go back for AJ.

It may not work, he warned me. *You have to concentrate very hard to do it and that may not be possible given the circumstances. Left, girl. Now!*

I darted left and tried to concentrate, but Min was right, it was damned hard to do. I could feel fear choking me and I tripped on a coiled hose and fell.

I can't do it, Min! I protested helplessly as Simon closed in on me.

You can, he insisted. *The only thing you have to fear is fear itself. It can choke you, make you lose your concentration. You have to be strong.* I could feel his worry as well as I could feel my own. *You need more blood for this to work*, he said quickly. *Cut yourself!*

With what? I demanded just as I felt Simon's feet on my leg.

"Got you, bitch!" he cried as he fell on top me. He grabbed my arms and twisted them behind my back.

Blood, Sam! Min yelled inside my head.

I closed my eyes and concentrated, only to feel Simon's fist impact with my chin. I slid down into the waiting darkness.

BAD EGGS

LYLE: WHAT THE HELL IS GOIN' ON?!

BUFFY: LONG STORY.

I almost screamed when I woke up, the pain in my head was that bad.

Shh, Min whispered urgently. *You have to be quiet. He's still here, don't let him know you're awake.*

I struggled to stay still and not make a sound. I opened my eyes a fraction and looked around as best I could. My body ached from the accident and the many falls I'd taken running from Simon.

My hands were tied behind my back to what felt like a metal ring. I was propped against a wall, my head hanging to the side. My ankles were tied together, and while I was still dressed, I felt cold and damp, as if I was lying in a basement. I could hear the sound of heavy rain, and occasionally thunder boomed through the night.

The room looked shabby and run down, and the windows were boarded up. I couldn't see any furniture, but there were chains attached to the floor and walls in various places. I tried not to think about the stains I saw near the chains. They looked like blood. I didn't see AJ anywhere, and I prayed they hadn't gone back to the car for him.

A door was opposite me and led into a hallway. I could see into the room across the hall where the only furniture I could see was a bed and a nightstand.

Where is he? I asked the Avatar just as I saw movement on the bed.

In the dim candlelight I saw a couple on the bed. They were moving such in a way that it took me a moment to realize they were having sex. My eyes snapped shut, but now I could hear their moans.

He's with the bloodsucker, Min replied.

What are you talking about? I demanded. *He's having sex with some woman!*

Look again, he ordered.

I did.

"Pru," I heard Simon say passionately. "Give it to me."

The woman gave a husky laugh. "Now, dear?"

"Now," he pleaded. I'd never heard him sound like that.

They sat up on the bed together and to my amazement I watched her bring her wrist to her mouth and when she brought it back down she was bleeding. Simon grabbed her arm and fastened his mouth on the wound. He moaned low in his throat while she smiled and I saw her teeth. Her canines were long and sharp, almost fangs, and they were covered with blood, her own.

Then she grabbed him by the hair and pulled him closer. While he still fed from her wrist, she bit into his neck. Their sounds of ecstasy filled the room and suddenly my stomach rebelled.

She's his master, Min explained.

I leaned to the side and my stomach emptied violently. I knew they would hear me, but even that couldn't stop me from doing it again. When my stomach settled, I looked up to see them standing in the doorway, naked, looking down at me.

The woman smiled, showing her teeth again, then pulled Simon to her by the hair again. She licked at the wound on his neck and to my amazement it closed. Then she licked her wrist and that wound too was gone.

"Your toy's awake," she purred. "When you're done with her, come see me. We'll play some more."

I could see the hole in Simon's forehead, and it was even clearer now than it had been before. The skin around the area was blackened as if burned, and blood trickled down his skin. Somehow I knew that no one else could see it.

He grabbed the vampire and kissed her ardently. I looked away, ready to vomit again. I heard the woman walk away and Simon go back into the bedroom across the hall. When he returned a few minutes later he was dressed, a fact that made me nearly faint with relief. I didn't think I could bear to have him touch me, especially after seeing him with Pru.

"You could have waited a little longer to wake up," he told me with a faint smile on his face. "But at least now I don't have to explain what's going on."

"Where's AJ?" I demanded. A split second later the force of his slap threw me back against the wall.

"I don't care about your lover, bitch," he said biting. "You're the one I wanted."

I shook my head to stop the ringing in my ears. "What is going on, Simon?" I asked him softly. "What is she? Why are you drinking her blood?"

He laughed. "I always knew you were a stupid bitch for all you thought you knew about weird shit like this," he told me. He pushed at my leg with his bare foot and I pulled away from his touch. "I should have known you wouldn't know a vampire when you saw one."

I tried to tell you, my Avatar said quietly. This guy's bad news. We need to get out of here, now.

How? I asked frantically. *It's obvious I can't do what you want me to, the power doesn't work for me like you thought it would. How are we supposed to get out of this?* Min didn't answer.

Simon grabbed me by the hair and pulled me forward. He untied the rope that held me to the post but left my hands tied together. He dragged me across the room where he left me against the wall. Without a word, he went back across the hall.

I heard water running and when he came back he threw a bucket of water on the mess I'd made. The water and the bile ran across the floor to a drain I hadn't seen earlier. When the floor was more or less clean, he turned back to me.

Simon crouched in front of me and I looked up at him, fighting to keep the fear from my eyes.

"I told you that you'd see me again," he reminded me. "For all that your brother and his master tried to keep me from you, we both know you need me." He reached out to touch my cheek, but when I tried to pull back, he grabbed my hair instead, pulling painfully.

"What are you talking about?" I asked him, wincing with pain and thoroughly confused.

"The bitch," he said firmly. When I still didn't get it, he added, "Brenda. She's a vamp."

I stared at him in surprise. *Min?* I asked carefully. I could accept that Brenda was a vampire, I'd suspected that myself. What I didn't want to believe that Rafe was some kind of slave to her.

She's not like Simon's master, Min replied. There are good and bad vampires just like people. And your brother doesn't act like this at all. These are bad eggs.

"Rafe?" I gasped aloud. "Rafe does that?"

"Now you're catching on, bitch," Simon said with satisfaction as thunder rocked the house.

"Why?" I couldn't understand why anyone would want to drink blood from a vampire.

"You wouldn't believe the rush." He smiled evilly. "Actually, in a few days you will."

I shrunk back away from him as much as I could with his hand in my hair. "No."

"I don't think you have a choice, Sam," he told me. "Just like you don't have a choice about who your boyfriend is. You won't be fucking that writer again, believe me. Prudence promised to turn me once she gets the item. Then you'll feed from me, and be mine forever."

"No," I said firmly, feeling the dig of my nails in the palm of my hand.

He's right, Min told me. Once you drink the blood, you'll be bound to him, just like Rafael is to Brenda.

"No!" I closed my eyes and concentrated on the feel of fresh blood on my hands. The rope around my wrists just kind of fell apart and I swung my fist up toward Simon. He pulled back and let go of my hair.

Chains on the floor rose up of at my command and pulled Simon away from me. He yelled for his master while I untied the rope at my ankles. Simon kept screaming, but I ignored him. I dashed toward the door, only to be stopped by Pru.

Before I could even blink, she backhanded me, hard. I fell to the floor in a nerveless heap, stunned. She grabbed my right arm and bent it until I felt like it was going to break off.

"Don't think you can get away that easily," she warned me. She grabbed the back of my shirt and dragged me across the room, but I couldn't fight her. I couldn't concentrate enough to do anything that Min had taught me.

Pru threw me up against the wall and snapped my wrists inside a pair of cuffs before walking back toward Simon. She pulled the chains off of him as if they were held down by string and helped him up. "You didn't tell me she was a witch," she said thoughtfully.

"I didn't know." He strode quickly over to where I stood sagging against the wall and delivered a stinging slap across my face. "Is that a bad thing?"

Between Simon and Pru, the side of my face felt like it was on fire. I shook my head to clear it, but that only made it worse. My arm hurt too, a deep pain that told me it probably was broken.

"Actually, dear," she drawled, "it's good for you. You'll have a very valuable toy once I bring you over." She walked over to him and put her hand on his cheek. "Did you want to play with her, or play with me?"

He grinned down at her. "She's not going anywhere." He put his arm around her and pulled her to him. I gagged and looked away. I heard them move toward the door and when it closed I breathed a sigh of relief.

What do we do now? I asked Min.

Now you try to open the manacles, he told me.

But I can't even see straight, I protested. *I can't do it!*

You don't need to see, he said sternly. *You just need to concentrate. You can do this, I know it. You just have to learn how to use your powers.*

Show me, I begged.

I will, he replied sadly, *but it may take time.*

I'm afraid, I told him softly. *We don't have a lot of time; we'd better get started.* I closed my eyes and did as Min instructed, doing my best to ignore the sounds of sex coming from across the hall.

KILLED BY DEATH

XANDER: YOU DON'T KNOW HOW TO KILL THIS THING.

BUFFY: I THOUGHT I MIGHT TRY VIOLENCE.

No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't concentrate enough for anything Min wanted me to do to work. From the nausea, the double vision and the way my head was pounding, I figured I had a concussion. I was tired, so tired, but I knew I couldn't sleep or I would die.

It wasn't very long before Simon and Pru were done with their rutting. I refused to watch them walk into the room, wouldn't even look up when they stood in front of me until Pru grabbed my hair and pulled my head back.

"Pretty," she purred. "At least she will be when she heals."

"She's plain," Simon said firmly as he walked around the room lighting candles. "Don't be giving her any ideas that she's beautiful, that bitch Brenda already planted that idea in her head. She's plain and she'll always be plain."

I looked up at him and smiled through my pain. AJ had made me feel like I was beautiful and nothing Simon would ever say could change that.

"What are you smiling for, slut?" he demanded.

"You wouldn't know beauty if it walked up and slapped you in the face," I whispered hoarsely.

Pru twisted my head painfully and came closer until her face was almost an inch from mine. "You're pretty forward for the situation you're in, little girl," she warned me. "Be careful or your master will punish you."

I laughed in her face. "Simon will never be anyone's master," I told her. "My brother will find me and you both will die like dogs."

Fury filled her eyes and her fist drove into my ribs. I felt at least one of the crack and gasped in pain.

Breathe, Min told me softly. Breathe through it. Pain can be ignored.

You fucking ignore it, I replied harshly, but I did try to breathe. I didn't want to give either of them the satisfaction of hearing me scream. I concentrated on the sound of the storm that was breaking outside.

"You sound just like Eliza," she drawled. "Neither of you get it, do you? You're under control of people who are stronger than you are, smarter. You thought you could walk away from Simon, but here you are."

She stepped back and looked at Simon. "Eliza thought she'd get away, but as soon as I find the item, she'll come crawling back to me. She'll forget this foolishness about that stupid bastard and come back to me."

Simon grinned. "Then you'll change me."

"I will."

I looked between the two of them, wondering if they were talking about the Eliza that Corrine knew. I prayed that they didn't find whatever it was Pru was looking for, Corrine would be upset if anything happened to her friend.

Pru looked down at me for a moment. "Are you sure you want this whey faced bitch?" she asked. "You could have anyone you want after your change."

"She's mine," he said firmly. "I want to make sure she regrets fucking that writer for the rest of her life."

If that was the case, I wanted to make the rest of my life as short as possible. Maybe I could make him mad enough to kill me. I couldn't stand to think of spending the rest of my life with this monster. I gathered what little moisture was left in my mouth and spit it at him.

Instantly his fist impacted with my face. Blood spurted from my broken nose and flowed like a river down my chin. For a moment the world turned black and I couldn't think. A few more blows like that one and my worries would be over.

I sagged and the only thing that held me up was the manacles on my wrists. Min was trying to say something, but I couldn't hear him over the roaring sound in my mind and the thunder crashing outside.

"What, you have to give pain to get off now, Simon?" I whispered when I could talk again. "Has her blood poisoned you?" I got my feet back underneath me and used the wall to help me take my weight off my broken arm.

Pru laughed. "Yes, she is just like the mole, my dear," she drawled. Through a haze of pain I watched her reach up and touch the side of his face. "We will win in the end. They will give us the love we deserve, Simon. Nothing can stop us now."

"Yes," he murmured as he leaned down to kiss her. I turned my head so I didn't have to watch.

"I'm off to Boston," Pru said a few minutes later. "I'll be back when I find the girl, I'm pretty sure I know where she is. Don't worry about anyone finding you here, Micky couldn't find his ass if someone kicked it for him."

"I'm not worried," he told her, chuckling. "I know I have all the time I need to bring Samantha around."

Pru walked out and Simon watched her go like a starving man looked at a roast beef sandwich. It made me want to get sick all over again, especially when my eyes were drawn to the hole I kept seeing in his forehead.

What is it? I asked Min.

Justice, he said again.

What the fuck does that mean? I demanded.

You're seeing his future, Min told me. *He's a dead man walking, he has been since he chose this path.*

I had to agree. "No matter what she said, they will find you," I whispered. "Brenda and Rafe will kill you for this." I knew they wouldn't give up until they found out what had happened to me, and I knew he'd die when they did.

"What, no threats about your lover looking for you?" he asked dryly. "Oh, that's right. He doesn't care enough about you to kill me," he drawled. "He'll just go back to New York and find some other bitch to fuck."

The fact that I thought he was right didn't make it hurt any less. "At least he pleases the women he fucks," I bit out. "You couldn't please a real woman if you tried, Simon."

That earned me a fist to the stomach and I lost my breath all at once. I think if I'd have had anything left in my stomach I would have lost it right there. Once again I sagged in the chains and I felt the skin on my wrists tear against the rough metal. The pain in my arm was so bad I thought I was going to pass out.

"Shut up, Bitch," he growled. "You belong to me now, you should have more respect for me than that."

Sam, take it easy, Min whispered urgently. *Are you trying to get him to kill you? Better than living the rest of my life like this*, I answered truthfully.

"Y-you don't d-deserve respect," I told him. My voice was shaking, but I didn't that stop me. "You're n-nothing but a fucking loser. I can't believe I ever let you t-touch me." It was true. What had I ever seen in this guy?

"Shut up or I'll shut you up," he warned me.

"Can't handle the truth?" I demanded. "You're a loser, Simon. With a—"

Once again his hand drove into my stomach and I couldn't breathe. Before I could recover enough to scream he shoved a dirty rag in my mouth and tied it there with a short piece of rope. The taste was horrible and I gagged over and over before I could control the reflex.

Breathe, Min told me again and again. Hold on, Sam. Just hold on a little longer.

Once Simon had the rope tied at the back of my neck he grabbed my hair and made me look up at him. The mark on his forehead drew my full attention, making me nauseous all over again.

"You know," he said softly, "you are almost beautiful like this. I should have put you in your place a long time ago." With a savage twist he pulled up and held me tight against the wall with his body. He was fully aroused.

I tried to twist out of his grasp, but I was too weak. He pulled my head to the side and started kissing my neck.

"You think you can piss me off enough to kill you," he whispered against my skin. His breath smelled like blood. "I won't do that, baby. I can't wait to feel my fangs bite into your skin so I can taste you."

He ran his tongue across the blood on my neck, following the trail of it up to my chin. His hand in my hair held me and I couldn't turn away. Then he bit into the side of my neck and I couldn't stop from screaming against the gag. His teeth tore into my skin and I felt him lap at the blood that oozed from the wound.

"Why don't we have some fun," he breathed into my ear. "I'm sure the writer taught you some real good whore's tricks you can show me." He ground his hips against me and I knew that if I didn't do something he would rape me against the wall of this dungeon.

When Simon moved back a little to fumble at the zipper of my pants, I brought my knee up hard into his groin. I thought for sure that would floor him, but he just gasped for a moment, then laughed.

"Hey, this is good too." He drove his fist into my ribs and I felt more of them break.

The pain was too much; I couldn't stop the sobs that tore through me. I could barely breathe over the gag through my still bleeding nose and I knew crying would make it worse, but I couldn't help myself.

Hold on, Min said again.

There's nothing to hold on to, I told him sadly. I'm going to die here and there's nothing I can do about it. Thunder shook the house to its foundation as Simon hit me across the face again.

"You really think they're going to find you bitch?" he asked, sounding very amused. "They have no idea where this place is."

He drove his fist into my hip hard enough for me to lose the feeling in my leg for a long minute. It hurt so badly that I couldn't think. I felt tears falling down my cheeks leaving clean tracks in the blood on my face and no matter how hard I tried I couldn't stop them.

"This is what you get for fighting me," he said harshly. "Don't ever try that shit again."

He hit me again, but I was in so much pain I barely felt it. I thought I heard a low growl come from the doorway, but deep down I knew Simon was right, they'd never find me in time.

You're very wrong, Min told me. They're here.

Simon pushed me back against the wall with his body again and grabbed my chin, turning my face up to his. A moment later, he was gone. I sagged against the wall trying hard to keep my feet, but I was too weak. Once again all my weight was on my wrists and I felt more blood trickle down my left arm. Dimly I realized I couldn't feel my right arm past the elbow.

"Get out of the way, bitch," I heard Simon say from across the room.

"Any questions you wanna ask him before I send him to hell?" I heard a familiar voice say.

I tried to lift up my head, I couldn't believe I wasn't imagining things and I had to see for myself that Rafe was actually there.

I told you everything would be okay, the Avatar told me. Just hold on a minute while they kill this guy.

"Where's Prudence?" I heard Brenda demand.

"Like I'd tell you that," Simon spit out.

I finally got my head up enough to look across the room and sure enough Brenda and Rafe were there. They were both holding guns to Simon's head. I dropped my head and started crying again, this time in relief.

Justice is about to be served, Min crowed.

"Tell me where she is," Brenda growled.

"She's not here," Simon told her contemptuously. "She went to Boston." I didn't understand why he was telling her anything at all.

Dominate, Min whispered. Very handy. Either that or he's incredibly stupid. I vote stupidity.

"Where in Boston?"

"She didn't tell me, somewhere in Boston. Are you going to move out of my way?" he demanded. "I've got something I need to finish."

A single gunshot echoed through the room but I didn't have the energy to look up and see who had died. I prayed to every deity that I could name that Min's justice had been done and it was Simon who was dead. A moment later gentle hands were pulling me up and other hands started untying the rope that held the rag in my mouth. Once the gag was gone I gulped at the air. I couldn't seem to get enough of it into my lungs and I felt like I was going to pass out.

"Hold her up," I heard Brenda say. "I'll see if I can get these off."

"Sam," Rafe whispered urgently. It was his hands that held me. "Sam, are you okay?"

I tried to tell him I was fine, but I couldn't speak. I felt Brenda's hands on my wrists trying to get the manacles off, but they were still locked.

"Do you see any keys anywhere?" Brenda asked.

"Keys? We don't need no stinking keys," I heard a strange male voice say. A moment later two new pairs of hands were working on the manacles.

"Now how do you do this?" a woman asked just before the manacles she'd been working on fell away. Seconds later I was free and Rafe lifted me into his arms.

"Hey, hey," yet another man said from the direction of the doorway. It sounded like he was trying to reassure them that he wasn't a threat. "I see you found him."

"Prudence is in Boston," Brenda said, her voice telling me she was very upset. "He didn't know where."

"What the fuck is she in Boston for?" the new voice said.

"That's where Corrine is," she replied. "You'd better call."

"The item?" He sounded surprised.

"The item," Brenda repeated.

He muttered an obscenity and I heard the sound of multiple cell phones dialing. My head was spinning too much for me to catch most of the conversation, but I heard enough to know that they were making sure Corrine was safe. I breathed a sigh of relief and relaxed in my brother's arms.

Rafe cradled me against his chest and talked to me softly while the woman who'd helped get the manacles off gently checked me for injuries. I could hear Brenda and the guy near the door talking but I didn't understand what they were saying.

"Get Samantha out of here," Brenda said clearly.

Rafe started moving and I bit my lip so that I wouldn't cry out. I knew he didn't mean to hurt me and I wanted out of there so badly that I knew I could ignore the pain. I heard other people following us but somehow I knew they were friends or Rafe wouldn't trust them at his back.

The rain felt good on my battered skin when Rafe carried me out of the house. I started shivering in the cool air, but it was much better than being in the stench of the basement.

"Sam?" I knew it was AJ, but I couldn't seem to open my eyes to look at him. "Oh my God, Sam! Is she alive?" His hands were on my face wiping away the blood and the rain. I tried to smile.

"She'll be okay," Rafe told him. "Let's get her in the car."

"Holy shit!" Brian exclaimed. "Is she okay?"

"Open the door," my brother ordered.

I heard a car door open and a moment later Rafe lowered me onto someone's lap.

Ah, that's it, Min said softly. Home at last.

"Easy, easy," AJ cautioned as he took me into his arms. "Everything's going to be okay, Sam," he promised me. "You'll be just fine."

Someone laid something warm and dry over me and AJ cradled me in the crook of his arm. I felt the car move and heard a door slam. Rafe took one of my hands and held it while AJ whispered soothing words against my hair. I wanted to tell them both I'd be fine, but I didn't seem to have the coordination to speak.

"What happened?" Brian asked.

"We took care of it," Rafe said, his voice strangely empty.

"What do you mean, you took care of it?"

Rafe didn't answer.

What happened? I asked Min.

Your brother had his first taste of death, he told me. I don't think he liked it too much.

What do you mean? Rafe had seen death before when our parent's died.

Min's reply made me want to cry. *He killed Simon.*

I'd wanted Simon dead, but I hadn't really thought about who would have to do the killing. That my brother had murdered for me broke my heart.

The car rocked again and I heard another door shut.

"Brian, go to my house," Brenda told him.

"Sam's hurt bad," he protested. "She should be going to the hospital."

"My house," she repeated firmly. "I've got a doctor on the way."

"Did you find Simon?" Brian asked as he started the car. "Rafe's not being communicative."

"He's taken care of," she assured him.

"Who's going to talk to the cops? Are they going to meet us at your house?"

I felt the car start moving and tried to snuggle closer to AJ. Someone adjusted the blanket over my legs.

"Don't worry about the police," she told him firmly.

"Okay," Brian said slowly. "I'm thinking Mafia."

Close, Min commented. Tremere are close to being Mafia, but the Giovanni are a hell of a lot closer.

That made me want to laugh, but I didn't have the energy. I listened to the car's engine and the rain on the roof and let the sounds carry me away from the pain. The storm sounded like it was finally letting up.

"Brian, do you have any napkins in the car?" Brenda asked softly.

"In the glove box," he replied.

A few minutes later I felt gentle hands cleaning the rain and blood and tears from my face. I did my best not to make any sound, but even that careful touch made me moan in pain.

Instantly the napkin moved away. "I'm sorry, Sam," AJ whispered. "Please open your eyes and look at me. Please wake up."

I wanted to tell him I was awake, but the pounding of my head drowned out all coherent thoughts. I tried to let myself drift off into sleep, but AJ kept talking to me, kept telling me that I had to wake up, that I couldn't leave him.

RESTLESS

XANDER: I'M AWAKE. I'M GOOD. DID I MISS ANYTHING?

GILES: NOT VERY MUCH AT ALL REALLY.

BUFFY: BUNCH OF MASSACRING.

Eventually the car stopped. Very carefully AJ picked me up and started walking. For a few moments I felt the rain again on my face, softer this time, then we were inside of somewhere. I knew he was trying to be gentle, but every step made my head vibrate in agony.

I thought I heard Brenda talking, but I couldn't make out what she said. AJ carried me through the house and up stairs until I thought I was going to scream for him to stop. He laid me down on something soft that smelled good and I sighed in relief.

"Everything's okay, Sam," AJ whispered, brushing the hair away from my face. "Please just be all right."

"Rafe, in the medicine cabinet there's some aspirin," Brenda said softly.

"Can't he get it?" my brother replied.

Her voice hardened. "Glass of water, go."

"You," she said to someone else. "Go get me another washcloth, a warm one." I felt a cold washcloth laid across my eyes and it felt so good I moaned.

"Okay," AJ told her. "I'll be right back, Sam." I felt the light touch of lips on my cheek, then he was gone.

The washcloth moved very lightly across my face taking with it most of the blood that remained. "Sam, honey," Brenda whispered, "are you okay?"

I wanted to answer her, I really did, but I couldn't. She was being so nice to me and this was all my fault. I hated knowing that Rafe had killed because of me. I felt tears seep from my eyes and run down my temples toward my hair.

"You're safe now," she said softly. "He's never going to hurt you again, we're all here."

"AJ," I whispered. He was just here, I knew he was. Where had he gone?

"He's here," she told me.

"Is she going to be alright?" I heard Rafe ask anxiously from close by.

"She'll be fine," Brenda told him. "There's a chair over there, can you wait in it? Let her breathe some?"

"Okay," he said reluctantly. "I'll just go sit over here."

He always freak like this, Min murmured.

Only when I almost die, I told him, remembering when I'd fallen into a frozen lake when I was nine. Rafe had pulled me out and gotten me to the hospital, but he'd freaked out then just like he was freaking out now.

I felt a strong arm slide under my shoulders. "I've got some aspirin," Brenda told me. "Can you take them?"

Aspirin. Maybe it would help the pain shooting through my skull. "Yeah." I tried to lift my head and Brenda was there to help. She put a pill in my mouth and held a glass of water to my mouth for me to drink from. Just swallowing hurt my neck where Simon had bit me. "AJ."

"I'm here." I felt the bed move a little and AJ picked up my hand. "I'm here," he said again. I finally got my eyes to open a little through the swelling and saw his worried face looking down at me.

I relaxed a little and let Brenda finish washing the blood from my face and neck. She was trying to be very careful, but there were a lot of places that hurt when she touched them. Still, it felt good to have the drying blood off of my skin.

"Okay guys, clear out," Brenda said firmly. "Graham is going to be here soon. I'm going to help Sam get out of those clothes."

"I'll help you," AJ offered.

I moved a little restlessly; I really didn't want AJ to see the bruises I knew were on my body. It was bad enough that I'm scrawny; for him to see me like this was unbearable.

"I can manage," she told him kindly.

The tall blond guy came over and put a hand on AJ's shoulder. "Come on," he said softly. "Let's give them some room. Brenda can handle this. She'll be okay long enough for us to go out and let her get changed."

AJ didn't want to go, but he knew he had to. He moved carefully off of the bed and let the guy lead him out of the room.

Then I saw yet another man walk over to the chair my brother was sitting in. "Hey, buddy," he said as he laid a hand on my brother's shoulder.

Rafe seemed a little surprised and looked up at the man. "Oh, okay." With one final look toward the bed, they too left the room.

Brenda breathed a sigh of relief when the door finally shut behind them. "Let's get you changed, all right?" she said softly. Moving me as little as she possibly could, she stripped my clothes off and used a warm washcloth to clean me up.

If I wasn't feeling pain when the cloth moved across my bruises, I would have known exactly where I was injured by the look on Brenda's face when she cleaned my injuries. Watching her I knew that if Simon weren't already dead, she would have killed him herself.

I tried to help her as best I could, but I still couldn't move very well, or think very clearly. It hurt when she put the nightgown over my head even though I knew she was trying to be careful.

"I wish I could just make it all go away," she whispered softly. She eased my legs down and covered me with the blanket just as a knock came at the door.

"Brenda?" It was the woman who had helped get me out of the manacles.

"Come in, Chris," she replied. "We're done."

"Graham's here," the girl said.

Ah, help at last, Min murmured, relieved.

"Please bring him in," Brenda said anxiously.

What do you mean? I asked the avatar.

He's someone who will make you feel better, he replied.

I rolled my head to the side in time to see an older man come into the room. He was wearing casual dress clothes and he looked kind.

"How's she doing?" the girl named Chris asked.

"She's really sore." Brenda shot me a worried glance, then looked at Graham. "There might be something broken but I cleaned her up as best I could."

Graham was studying my face. "Do you mind if I have a look?" Without waiting for an answer he came over and sat on the bed next to me.

He laid a hand on my forehead and goose bumps ran up and down my skin. It felt like every inch of me was being examined but it didn't hurt.

What's happening? I asked Min.

Pay attention, girl, he told me. This is a master at work. You may learn something.

"She has a couple of broken ribs," Graham told Brenda as he moved his hand away, "and one of the bones in her right arm is cracked. She also has a lot of bruises and so forth, but we can take care of that here. Would you mind leaving us alone for just a moment? It's easier."

She looked at me anxiously. "That's fine." I could tell she didn't want to go, but she took the other girl and left me alone with this strange man.

He smiled at me. "Just relax, Samantha," he told me. "Let me heal you." When I nodded a little, he added, "I'll try not to hurt you, but you're injured pretty bad. Breathe through the pain, it can be ignored."

Now he sounded like Min. I nodded again and took a deep breath.

Graham closed his eyes and began chanting in Latin. I listened closely, trying to understand the words but I didn't recognize the spell. He laid his hand on my forehead again and I felt a white heat shoot through my body.

It was as if a thousand lights shone at once blinding me and warming me to the core. Everywhere I was hurt jerked and I could almost feel the flesh and bone mending again. It did hurt, for a minute anyway. I breathed, trying to ignore the pain.

That's it, Min encouraged. Just a few more minutes.

And he was right. When Graham smiled down on me and lifted his hand a few minutes later I felt much better.

"What did you do?" I whispered. "How?"

"I used the spheres of life and spirit to begin your healing," he explained. He went into a little more detail, answering questions patiently for several minutes. Finally he asked, "Are you aware that you're pregnant?"

I stared at him, stunned, speechless. *A baby?*

That's right, luv, Min confirmed. I would have told you sooner, but I thought you had enough to worry about.

"I didn't think you knew," Graham said. "Don't worry, everything is fine with him. You're only a week or so along, he's still very protected."

I couldn't believe it. I was actually having a baby, AJ's baby. I dismissed the idea that it could be Simon's, we hadn't had sex for months before I'd slept with AJ.

Hard on the heels of that thought was the knowledge that AJ would be so angry with me when he found out. We hadn't discussed birth control at all, and here I was, pregnant. How could I tell him about this? He'd just feel obligated to me because he was a friend of my brother. I couldn't allow that to happen.

"Please," I said softly, "can you not tell anyone about this? It's very unexpected."

"Of course, my dear," he replied. "Just take care of yourself and tell them when you're ready."

"Thank you," I told him. "For that and the healing."

"It was nothing, my dear," he said kindly. "Healing is one of my passions. I'm just glad I could help."

Just then a knock came at the door and Graham turned toward it. "Yes, we're done," he called out. "Come in." As Brenda opened the door he looked down at me again. "If you have any questions, just go ahead and give me a call and I'll be happy to answer them. I know that you're not on the same path that I am, but we can talk." He handed me a business card, which I took gratefully.

In under a minute the room seemed full again. AJ and Rafe came in first and they hovered like they wanted to get much closer but didn't know if they should. Brian came to stand at the foot of the bed again and Brenda stood near Rafe. I didn't see the strange guys who'd been there before, or the girl named Chris.

I smiled at the worried look that was on everyone's face. "Is this a party and nobody told me I was invited?"

Brenda came over and kissed me on the forehead. She tucked my hair behind my ear and smiled. "You gave us a scare, are you okay?"

"Brenda, I am so sorry," I told her. I felt so guilty for putting everyone through this.

"It's not your fault," she replied softly.

Yeah, it was my fault. "Ah, I'm sorry," I whispered again, looking at Rafe.

She leaned down and hugged me. "It's not your fault," she repeated. "We're just glad you're going to be fine."

I felt the bed move again and looked to see AJ sitting next to me. "Are you okay?" he asked anxiously. His question was echoed by Rafe who had come to stand behind Brenda.

"Whoa, take it easy," I told them both with a smile. "I'm fine."

Brenda led Graham out into the hall just as I noticed a stunned expression on Brian's face. I knew he was wondering just how in hell I'd healed so quickly. Actually, I was surprised that AJ hadn't noticed. I knew I'd have to explain but now wasn't the time.

"Okay," he said slowly. "What the hell happened?"

Rafe turned and looked at him and I could see indecision on his face.

"Brian, come here," I told him. When he walked closer, Rafe moved back to give him room. I held out my hand and he took it, sitting down on the edge of the bed. "You know how you're always telling me that the coven is a waste of my time and that magic isn't real?"

He nodded, staring down at my unmarred wrist.

"It is real, Brian," I said softly. "All of it is real."

He looked into my eyes and smiled then leaned forward and hugged me. "I'm glad," he whispered in my ear. "For your sake I'm glad. You were pretty messed up."

"I'm fine," I told him. "I'll be just fine." As soon as I figured out what to do about the baby, anyway.

What do you mean, figure it out? Min demanded. You can tell them all right now, then get ready for the wedding.

That is not going to happen, Min, I said fiercely. I can't trap AJ that way, I won't.

REVELATIONS

BUFFY: SO ON A SCALE OF ONE TO A MILLION, HOW MUCH ARE YOU HATING ME RIGHT NOW?

WILLOW: ZERO.... I MEAN, SECRETS AREN'T BAD. YOU KNOW, THEY'RE NORMAL. THEY'RE BETTER THAN NORMAL. THEY'RE GOOD. SECRETS ARE GOOD. MUST BE A REASON WHY WE KEEP THEM, RIGHT?

The four of us talked quietly for a few minutes until Brenda came back into the room.

"Sam," she asked gently, "can you tell us what happened?"

I glanced at AJ, not sure how to explain the Avatar. Somehow I didn't think the guys would understand. "I saw the car following us," I told her, "and I knew it was trouble. I told AJ to try and lose it, but it just kept on coming. Then it ran us into the telephone pole and AJ was unconscious."

Remembering the blood I'd seen on his face, I looked at him anxiously. He must have had his own turn at healing because the gash that had been on his temple was gone. He squeezed my hand encouragingly and I went on.

"I saw Simon get out of the car and I knew that I was the one he wanted. I knew that if I ran he'd come after me and leave AJ alone." I looked down and tried not to remember the terror I'd felt when I was running from Simon. "I avoided them for a little while, but then he caught me. I woke up in that dungeon."

"It's okay, Sam," AJ said softly. I realized I was clutching at his hand and made myself stop. "Simon is dead, he can't hurt you again."

I looked at my brother and tears filled my eyes. I wished there were some way I could change the past so that he wouldn't have had to kill for me.

"There was this woman there, she was really, really weird." I looked pointedly at Brenda. "Really, really weird."

"What did she look like?" she asked. When I described the woman, she asked if I'd caught a name.

"Pru," I told her, "although I believe 'Mistress' was also used." I was trying to tell her without words what Pru was.

Brenda nodded. "Anything else? Did she say that she was going somewhere?"

"She said that she'd found out where the item was and she was going after it." I glanced at Brian and AJ, not sure exactly what I should say in front of them.

I think Brenda figured that out. "Are you hungry?" When I shook my head, she said to the guys, "Why don't you go get her some juice or something?"

It took her a couple of minutes to get them out of the room, but eventually they went.

"She was, ah...." How in the world could I say this? "You know what I meant when I said she was really weird, don't you?"

"What exactly did you see?" she asked carefully.

I ran a hand over my eyes. "More than I wanted to."

"What happened?"

"It was really disgusting." I sighed deeply. "But you probably wouldn't think so."

"What did you see, Samantha?" she asked again.

I looked down at my hands. "She bit him." Suddenly I remembered what she'd said in that basement. "Um, she said that she was going to take care of the item so that Eliza would have no choice. Do you have any idea what that means?"

"I do, but it's something that I can't discuss with you." I could tell that bothered her.

"I'm not even sure I want to know, but—"

"It has nothing to do with you," she assured me.

Tell her what Pru said, Min prompted. Brenda can make sure that Corrine is safe.

"I'm thinking that Corrine Wright is the item from the way that things were said," I told Brenda. "I don't know if you know Eliza Dushku, but I know that Corrine and Eliza are close. Pru wants Eliza back under her control, and she thinks that if she gets Corrine she can make that happen. I thought that you would probably know how to get a hold of these people."

She smiled and took my hand. "Don't worry, I'll take care of things."

Her hand was cold. It was very strange to be sitting here talking with this vampire when another one had been involved in my abduction. Still this was Brenda, right? Just because I knew what she was didn't mean she was any different than she'd been a week ago.

She cares about you, Sam, Min said.

Tell me something I don't know, I replied dryly.

Finally I smiled and looked up at her. "Cold hands, warm heart?"

"Something like that," she said, smiling back at me.

I nodded. "Well, you better let the guys back in, or they're going to go ballistic," I told her.

A look came over her face that I hadn't seen before. It was almost as if she was silently asking for my acceptance. "Is there anything you want to ask me about?" she asked very hesitantly.

I sighed and looked down at our hands. "You really love him, don't you?"

"I do," she said ardently.

She does, Min added.

"That's all I need to know," I told her, ignoring the Avatar. When she smiled in relief, I couldn't resist from adding, "Except, just one minor detail. I'm going to be in the wedding, right?"

"Of course," she replied with a squeeze of my hand. "I won't let anything happen to him," she said. It sounded like a vow.

"Thank you." I knew she'd keep him safe and that was all I could ask for.

She glanced toward the door. "You must understand that what you know cannot be shared with anyone," she warned me.

Kindred are pretty tight lipped about stuff like that, Min told me. Like what happened at Mother Abigail's.

"I don't know anything," I assured her. *What about Mother Abigail's?* I demanded of the Avatar.

"I mean anyone," she stressed. "Even AJ."

The vampires.

"I don't want to put him in danger," I told Brenda. The sooner he went back to New York, the better off everyone would be. That just made me think about the baby again. What was I going to do?

I was saved from further thought about it when the guys came back. They had three different kinds of juices, just in case I didn't like one or two of them. Brenda moved back and let them hover for a few minutes until I lost my patience.

"Okay, this is too much," I told them. I pointed at Rafe. "Go find something to do with Brenda." I looked at Brian. "You can go home."

Brian smiled in relief. "You do feel much better, don't you?"

I smiled back. "Yeah."

Rafe went to Brenda and hugged her. "Let's go find something to do," he said softly.

"I guess I'm just going to go home," Brian added.

When they'd all left, AJ turned to me. "What do you want me to do?" he asked softly.

Should I tell him now? It was only a matter of time until he found out, I couldn't exactly hide a baby. And by the Gods, Rafe would be pissed. He was sure to insist that AJ and I get married. I couldn't stand for that to happen, I knew AJ wouldn't be happy with someone like me.

"Lay with me?" I asked AJ.

"You sure you're feeling better? I don't want to hurt you." When I nodded, he laid down beside me and took me into his arms.

It felt so nice there, so right. I listened to his heartbeat and let the even sound carry me off to sleep.

HOMECOMING

CORDELIA: I DON'T EVEN GET WHY YOU CARE ABOUT HOMECOMING WHEN YOU'RE DOING STUFF LIKE THIS.

BUFFY: BECAUSE THIS IS ALL I DO. THIS IS WHAT MY LIFE IS. YOU COULDN'T UNDERSTAND.

The next morning Rafe and AJ started right in on pampering me. I didn't need it really, I felt a little sore, but not enough to be bedridden like they seemed to think. Finally I sent Rafe off to bed and asked AJ to get me something to eat.

"I want to go home," I told AJ as he sat the tray down on the bed.

"When you're feeling a little better," he replied.

"I'm feeling fine," I said firmly. "I want to go home, now."

He looked at me and I could tell he didn't like the resolve on my face. Too bloody bad, I was sick of being at someone else's house. I wanted my own bed in my own room and I wasn't going to take no for an answer.

Way to go, girl, Min whispered.

"All right," he reluctantly agreed. "Eat first and I'll take you home."

I smiled and ate. Good thing Rafe had gone to bed, I'm sure he'd give me a hard time too. I finished pretty quickly and while AJ was taking the tray downstairs I got myself dressed. It wasn't real easy, I was still pretty sore, but I managed to have my clothes on by the time AJ got back.

"Sam," he said sharply, "you should have waited for me."

"Why?" I demanded. "I'm not an invalid. Graham healed me, AJ, do you forget that?"

He seemed uncomfortable about that reminder. "You're not fully healed, Sam, you need to take it easy."

I didn't like the way he was avoiding what had happened with the mage. He acted like he wanted to pretend it never happened. I shook my head and bent to put on my shoes, but he was right there helping me.

A part of me was really happy that he was willing to help me like this, but another part was upset that he thought he had to baby me.

Just let him, Min suggested. *If he thinks you're helpless he'll—*

Pester me to death, I interrupted, but I didn't say anything. I let AJ help me with my shoes and hold my arm as I walked downstairs, thankful every step of the way that Rafe and Brian didn't know I was going home.

I was tired when we got to the house, but not tired enough to go to bed. AJ sat me down in the living room and offered to get me something to drink. I sent him in the kitchen for some juice and laid back on the couch to relax.

When he came back a few minutes later he had a tall glass of apple juice. He sat down next to me and watched me closely as I drank it.

"You look tired, Sam," he said softly. "Are you sure you don't want to go to bed?"

I closed my eyes and leaned my head back against the couch. "Are you offering to go there with me?" I asked him with a smile.

"No," he said quickly. "You're hurt, you need your rest."

I sat up and gave him an even look. "Look at me, AJ," I told him sharply. "I didn't break last night and all I have left are some bruises and a little soreness. I am fine, Graham healed me, remember?"

Once again he looked uncomfortable and it pissed me off to think that he would so totally deny that magic existed. He wrote about it all the time, for crying out loud.

"AJ," I began, my voice a little softer. "What do you think happened when I was alone with Graham last night?"

He took my hand and looked down at it. "He did something to make you look like nothing happened," he said quietly.

"No, AJ," I corrected him as kindly as I could. "He healed me. I don't just look better, I feel better. Graham is a mage, AJ and I am too."

That certainly caught his attention. He looked up quickly, shock written all over his face. "What are you talking about?"

"Magic," I told him. "I'm talking about magic."

I could feel the tenseness in his fingers as he held my hand, but I wasn't going to take back what I'd said. It was clear that he either couldn't believe it or didn't want to.

"AJ, you can't write about all this stuff and not believe just a little that it could be true," I said softly.

"Believing in the abstract is one thing, Sam," he replied. "Believing when it's shoved in your face is quite another."

"I wouldn't lie to you, AJ," I whispered honestly.

He smiled and squeezed my hand. "I know you wouldn't," he assured me. "It's just a lot to take in."

I nodded and looked down. The only reason it was so easy for me was that I'd been involved in magic for years, even if I hadn't been able to actually do magic.

"So you're really feeling better?" he asked.

"Really," I told him. "I'm fine."

"I was so worried when I woke up and you were gone," he confessed softly. "I tried to get out of the car, but I think I had a concussion. The next thing I knew Brenda's sister was there and she took me into the Dragon's Wing. Graham was there too, Samantha. He healed me."

I hadn't heard this part of the story, although I known something like it had happened.

"I chalked it up to the accident," he continued. "I thought that I was just confused, that I really hadn't been hurt in the wreck. Then he healed you." He reached up and touched my cheek. "I'm so glad you're all right."

I smiled. "I'm glad we both are."

He pulled me into his arms and I fell asleep there, safe and warm.

PROPHECY GIRL

CORDELIA: MEN. I DON'T KNOW WHY WE PUT UP WITH THEM.

WILLOW: I HEAR YA.

Corrine called while I was 'recovering'. AJ almost didn't let me talk to her, but I insisted. She was out of town and wanted to get our Psychology homework from me, but I had to tell her I didn't go.

"Actually, I missed class this week, too," I admitted reluctantly. "I had a little... accident and they won't let me do anything too stressful."

"Oh, no," she exclaimed, "are you all right? What happened?"

I couldn't lie to her. "I had a run in with an ex-boyfriend. I'm all right, it's just that the men in my life are being a little overprotective."

"I hope everything is all right," she told me.

"It is now," I said thankfully. "I don't think they'd be this bad, but Simon... he got a little rough. Actually, I wanted to ask if you were all right, I was kind of worried about you."

"Why would anything be wrong with me?" she asked, puzzled.

Goddess, it was hard to explain. I told her about Pru and overhearing Brenda talking to someone about making sure Corrine was safe. When she asked what night it had happened, I told her.

"That's why we had to leave Boston," she murmured.

"I'm glad you got out before she found you," I said sincerely. "The woman seemed to think she could use you to control Eliza."

"Jared and I went to Nashville," she told me, "but we're in Ireland now."

We talked for a little while about the whole thing, and I was surprised to learn that Corrine was adopted. What surprised me more was the fact that Eliza was her mother. Eliza would have looked younger than Corrine if it wasn't for the shadows in her eyes.

Corrine had also found her birth father, and he was currently trying to work things out with Eliza. I told her that I hoped everything worked out for the best.

She said she'd be back some time on Saturday, and I asked if she wanted to come by and see me. She agreed and we rung off.

Corrine called before she came over on Sunday, and I was more than happy to hear from her. I was feeling just fine, thank you very much, and I needed an excuse to get away from the men in my life who were determined to keep me in bed.

Her call also gave me an excuse to get rid of my brother. It seemed there was an arrangement with Brenda's vampire clan that said Corrine couldn't have any contact with Kindred ghouls. Rafe was a ghoul, Corrine was coming over, Rafe had to leave. As much as I love my brother, he seriously needed to stop hovering.

AJ answered the door when she showed up an hour or so later, and I think it surprised her. She stood and stared at him openmouthed for a moment.

"H-hi," she said at last.

"Corrine?" AJ asked with a smile.

"Yeah," she told him. "AJ McLean?"

He must have been used to that kind of reaction from strangers because he didn't let it bother him. "Come on in, Sam's expecting you."

I walked closer to the door and grinned at the expression on her face. "Corrine, come on in," I told her, gesturing behind AJ's back that she should close her mouth.

She looked at me wryly. "Okay, you told me you were dating someone but you didn't say that it was..."

"AJ McLean," I supplied when she seemed at a loss for words.

"Right," she agreed.

"AJ, this is Corrine Wright," I told him.

"Corrine the babbling idiot," she added.

"No, you're not a babbling idiot," he said kindly as he shook her hand. "Don't worry about it."

"Wow," she said softly. "And you're a friend of Samantha's brother?"

"Yeah, we went to school together in New York."

"Wow."

He talked to her about Rafe and Howie's new roles as his agent before I finally managed to get him out of the house. Not that I didn't want to spend time with him, mind you, I just needed some time to relax.

"What time do you think you'll be back?" he asked on his way out the door.

"I don't know," I told him seriously. "We may be gone hours, days."

Corrine had to cover her mouth to stop from laughing, and AJ shot her a stern look.

"You know it's only been four days," he reminded me, "you shouldn't be out, but I'm not your father. Don't stay out too long, I don't want you to get sick."

"Don't worry," Corrine assured him. "I won't let her go bull riding or test driving any Masarati's or anything like that."

"Don't encourage her," he replied firmly, bending to kiss my cheek on his way out the door.

"Thank goddess he's gone," I murmured, turning to Corrine, who smiled in understanding.

Now that we were alone I could see something in the air around Corrine, something that was just out of sight, but there just the same.

What is it? I asked Min.

It's Fate, he told me.

What's that supposed to mean?

She has a Destiny just like Simon did, he explained. *That's what you see in her aura. It's a strong one too, from the looks of it.*

Simon died, I reminded him. *Is she going to die to?*

Nothing is certain, he told me, *but I doubt she'll die anytime soon.*

"Well, he seems to care about you a great deal," she told me.

"Yes he does seem to," I agreed, "but I'm fine. Don't I look fine?"

"You would be a better judge of anyone else," she stated.

"So, did you really want to go somewhere, or did you want to have something here?" I asked softly. "I have stuff that if I don't make it it'll go bad. Do you mind if I just whip something up?" Plus I wanted to look at her aura some more and it would be easier without the distractions in a restaurant.

"Sure, as long as you let me help," she told me.

I agreed and we went into the kitchen. She asked me how I was really feeling, and I told her what Graham had done in Brenda's bedroom. We talked about the coven and I got the feeling she wanted to join, but with Brenda being so involved with us, that was impossible.

As we ate we talked about magic and what we'd learned, then she asked if AJ knew that I had Awakened. I told her that we'd discussed it, but that he'd been skeptical.

"It doesn't really matter, I guess," I added. "He's going to go back to New York."

She gave me an odd look. "Are you sure?"

"What's he going to stay here for?" I asked her. Before she could say anything else, I went on quickly. "He lives in New York, he's lived in New York his whole life. Everything he knows is there and he writes there and I'm sure there are girls he dates there and there's just really no reason for him to stay here."

I could tell she didn't agree with me, but she chose not to argue the point.

Brian came in as we were finishing our lunch. He called out my name from the hall and I told him to come into the kitchen.

"Who's here?" he asked as he entered, then he looked at Corrine. "Hi."

"Hi," she said softly.

"Brian, I'm so surprised to see you," I said dramatically as he bent to kiss my cheek. I'd actually been expecting him to show up. "Do you know Corrine?"

"No, I don't," he admitted, turning to her.

"Corrine, this is my cousin Brian Littrel." I looked up at my cousin. "We were just finishing eating, you want to sit down and have something?"

"No, I already had a bite," he told me as he sat down. "What are you girls doing?"

"Just getting ready to get up and start line dancing," I said seriously.

Corrine suppressed a grin. "You know I heard about this bull riding session that Samantha sounded really interested in."

"Uh-huh," I put in, hiding my own smile.

"But you know we knew that we had to have a signed permission slip from either you or AJ or Rafe, so let me get my purse." She reached around as if looking for it, then snapped her fingers in dismay. "Oh, drat, I think I left it at home."

He gave her a disgruntled look. "You're encouraging her."

"I don't think she needs any encouragement," Corrine told him, smiling openly now.

"She's still sick," he said firmly.

I smacked his arm. "I am not sick," I told him.

"She doesn't look sick to me," Corrine agreed.

I got up to clean off the table and she started helping me.

"So, what are you guys really doing today?" Brian asked.

She told him she'd come to check on me and talk about the classes we'd missed.

"Oh, you go to school together?" He sounded very interested. "Sam's missed some classes."

"She knows I've missed classes, Brian," I said irritably. "Can we stop talking about it? I'm fine."

He smiled at me smugly. "I'll just let AJ deal with you," he told me.

I rolled my eyes and tried to ignore him.

While Corrine and Brian talked, I took the opportunity to study her aura again, trying to figure out what the shapes I saw meant. I thought I saw something reminiscent of a skull, and something else that made me think of anger, but a happy anger.

Joyous rage, Min corrected. *Death and joyous rage. Do you see the raven?*

After a moment I could, but just barely. It wasn't really a raven, it was the *Raven's son*, I corrected Min. *The raven's son united with joyous rage.*

Yes, he cried happily. *You're catching on well, although her destiny is strong, so she's easy. What else do you see?*

I squinted, trying hard not to look like I was staring at her. I could see things floating in the air around her, but it was hard to make out what they were. And it wasn't so much a matter of seeing what was there as *knowing* what they meant.

She is the daughter of the raven's son, I told Min. *The raven's son and joyous rage are her parents. Something about being of her father's line but saving her mother's people.*

That's it, Samantha, he replied, a satisfied tone to his words. *I think you found your gift. What?*

Prophecy, he told me. *You're the prophecy girl.*

While I was busy learning from Min, Brian and Corrine were discussing the house he'd bought to renovate and rent out. It turned out that Eliza was Brian's new tenant in the upstairs apartment, and Corrine wanted to surprise her by furnishing it before she got back from her trip.

It sounded to me like they both wanted to get to know each other, but neither one was saying anything too obvious when AJ came back. He came into the kitchen and looked around in surprise.

"What are you guys still doing here?" he asked me. "I thought you were leaving?"

It had only been an hour since he'd left. "I thought you weren't coming back for a long time?" I countered.

"I just wanted to check and make sure—"

"I'm fine," I told him before he could finish the thought.

When I looked at Brian I was surprised to see something in the air around him too. I looked again, closer, and realized that whatever it was matched exactly something in Corrine's aura.

They are destined, Min told me. *Isn't that sweet?*

"Actually, I'm a little tired," I said quickly. "Why don't you guys go ahead? I'm just going to lay down for a little while."

With AJ, Min whispered. It wasn't a bad idea.

Corrine looked a little nervous at the thought of being alone with Brian.

"He's not going to bite," I said softly.

She laughed. "Of course not."

I turned to my cousin. "You don't bite anymore, do you Brian?" I asked, trying to be serious. "There was this one time when I was about four that I bit him and he bit me back," I told Corrine.

"I really don't bite," Brian assured her, "but if you don't want to—"

"No, that would be great," she said quickly, looking at me. "I'll give you a call later if you're not too tired."

I laughed. "I'm sure I won't be." I'd had way too much rest in the last week already.

"AJ is here to take care of you after all," she said dryly. "Maybe we'll go bull riding tomorrow."

"Okay, that sounds good," I replied enthusiastically. "I'll see if I can get one of these guys to sign the permission slip."

AJ looked down at me in surprise. "Bull riding?"

Corrine and I just laughed. She left with Brian a few minutes later.

"Are you really tired?" AJ asked as he sat down next to me after they were gone.

I smiled at him. "Not really, but I'd like to go to bed just the same."

He grinned. "Want company?"

"Always," I said truthfully. I couldn't imagine having anyone but him in my bed.

Still, it was like waiting for the other shoe to drop. I knew he wasn't staying forever, he had deadlines and things to handle in New York. I wanted him to stay with me but I wanted it to be over too. The longer he stayed the more I loved him, and the harder it was going to be for me when he did leave.

GOODBYE IOWA

RILEY: I DON'T KNOW... ANYTHING. I DON'T KNOW WHAT'S GOING ON, WHO THE BAD GUYS ARE. MAYBE I'M THE BAD GUY.

"Sam, I need to talk to you," AJ said hesitantly.

Here it is, I thought to myself.

Don't jump to conclusions, Min admonished.

"What is it?" I asked softly, steeling myself for the hurt I knew was coming.

"I need to go back to New York," he told me. "There are a lot of things I need to take care of that I've just been putting off. It shouldn't take me that long, but—"

"AJ, you don't need my permission to leave," I replied with a sad smile. "I knew you weren't going to stay in Salem forever." He'd already been in town a week longer than he'd originally planned.

"I'm coming back," he told me.

As much as I wanted to hear that, I knew he wouldn't be coming back for me. "You don't have to."

That surprised him. "What do you mean?"

"Look, I know you have a life in New York," I said as if it didn't bother me. "A life you need to get back to."

"But—"

I couldn't bear to let him finish. "And I have to build one here on my own," I told him firmly. "I'm healed now and you don't have to worry about any danger to me. Simon's dead, remember? Go back to your life. Forget about me."

He looked at me for a long moment, almost as if he was trying to read my soul. "Is that what you want?" he asked finally.

I looked at him calmly and lied. "Yes."

He seemed to be weighing my reply, testing it in his mind to see if it sounded like the truth. "If that's what you want, Samantha," he said softly, "that's what you'll get."

When he turned to pick up his jacket, I had second thoughts. "AJ," I whispered.

He looked back at me expectantly, and I wanted so badly to tell him that I loved him, to tell him about our baby, but I knew it wouldn't be fair to him. I had to let him go now or I'd never be able to watch him walk out the door.

I tried to smile. "It was good," I said honestly. "Thank you."

A disappointed look crossed his face. "It was, Sam," he agreed. He walked closer and gave me a soft kiss, then turned and left.

"Goodbye, Iowa," I whispered softly as he walked to the door. He hesitated for a moment in the doorway, but didn't turn around before he left. I watched him drive away and tears fell down my cheeks.

I knew it was for the best, AJ didn't want to be saddled with me for the rest of his life just because I'd been stupid and not thought about birth control. There was no need to punish him for thinking I was taking care of it, was there?

What if he wants the baby? Min asked.

He doesn't even know about it, I reminded him.

Don't you think you should tell him?

I didn't answer the avatar, I just walked through the house and out into the back yard. I sat in the swing Brian had built for me and looked out over the garden. Usually sitting with the flowers made me feel better, but today I knew I'd find no solace there or anywhere else.

Rachael came over a little while later and sat with me in silence. She didn't ask me what was wrong, and she didn't try to make me feel better. It was like she knew I was hurt somewhere that she couldn't help.

As the sun was going down, she gave me a hug and whispered that I should come and talk to her about it when I felt better. I tried to smile and told her I would, but deep down I didn't think I'd ever feel better.

A few minutes later, I heard Rafe calling from inside the house. I didn't answer him, but he eventually found me. He took one look at my face and stopped dead.

"AJ called me," he said softly.

I didn't answer him, just looked down at the grass under my feet.

"Do you want to talk about it?" he asked.

"I don't think so."

"Sam, you have to," he insisted. "Tell me what's going on in that head of yours."

I shot him a cold look. "You're my brother, Rafe, you don't own me."

He took a deep breath. "I'm just trying to understand what happened."

"He left," I said bluntly. "What is there to understand?" I got up and walked into the house trying to get away from him but he followed me in.

"Did you tell him you love him?" he demanded.

"It's none of your business what I told him," I shot back.

"Sam, if he just took off then—"

"Damn it, Rafe," I exploded. "This is none of your concern. I'm a big girl now and I can handle an affair whether you want to believe it or not."

"Can you?" he asked harshly. "Is that why you're so pale you look transparent?"

"I don't need this, Rafe," I told him. "I don't need anyone to take care of me."

"I think you do," he said firmly.

I know he would have said more, but the sound of the doorbell cut through our argument. I turned and walked away.

SOMETHING BLUE

BUFFY: CAN YOU BELIEVE IT?

RILEY: I DON'T THINK "NO" IS A STRONG ENOUGH WORD.

I opened the door to see Brenda standing there. "Goddess, not another one." I turned and headed into the living room.

"Well, it's nice to see you too, Samantha," Brenda drawled as she followed me.

"Do I really need two people telling me what to do?" I demanded. I couldn't take it, I had to be alone. I went into the kitchen for a drink, but I could still hear them talking.

"What the hell is going on?" Brenda asked my brother.

"You tell me and we'll both know," he replied. "She doesn't want to talk about it, she doesn't—I don't know."

"Let me talk to her about it," she told him. "Stay out here."

"Okay."

Great, just what I could do without, a heart to heart talk with Brenda. When she entered the kitchen I could feel the air around me change.

Uh-oh, Min murmured. *Big guns*.

I can feel it, I told him. She was using her powers to try and make me more 'reasonable', whatever that meant.

"Sam," she said softly from the doorway.

I turned around and looked at her calmly. "Brenda."

"Honey, what is going on?"

"There's nothing going on, I don't understand why you guys think there is," I said honestly. "AJ went back to New York. He lives in New York. He does not live here, he lives in New York."

"I was under the impression that you guys were developing something," she murmured quietly.

"Brenda, we were sleeping together," I said bluntly. "This is not developing something. We were two adults who had a relationship—"

"Okay, so he changed his plans to stay here," she shot back irritably, "he seemed awfully worried about you during that whole thing with Simon—"

"I'm Rafe's sister," I reminded her. "Of course he's going to be worried about me."

"—and he never really spent a whole lot of time with Rafe when he was here," she finished.

I sighed. "Brenda, what do you want me to say? He was here, we had a fling, and now he went back home." And here I was, alone and pregnant.

Not quite alone, Min corrected.

"I was hoping that you considered me friend enough that you could talk to me about what is going on," she said, a hurt tone to her voice. "Obviously I was wrong."

"I am telling you, what do you want me to say?"

"I want you to tell me the truth, Samantha." I could feel the very power of her presence pulling for me to trust her, to put my faith in her. "Your brother is out there, in the living room. He's upset because you're upset."

I had to smile. The trick she was using didn't really make me feel any different about her. Brenda was my friend, like a sister, really. I was telling her the truth. "I'm not upset. Where do you get that I'm upset? I knew this was coming, I knew he was going to go home, he went."

"You're being awfully blasé about the whole thing," she told me.

I threw up my hands. "Would it help if I screamed and cried and begged him to stay here?" It was hard for me not to cry even now.

"It might have." She came closer to me, watching my face. "Sam, honey I know that there's something going on."

"Brenda, I don't know why you're acting like this is something unexpected," I told her honestly. "He doesn't live in Salem. He doesn't live with me, he lives in New York."

"But he just spent the last two weeks with you."

As if I needed to be reminded. "Haven't you ever spent two weeks with someone and then never called them again?"

"No, I haven't," she replied. "I'm sorry."

"Well, it happens that way sometimes." I know my voice came out a little harsh, but I couldn't help it. "Do you think this is some Harlequin novel where the prince sails in and they fall in love and everyone lives happily ever after?"

She put her hand on my arm and looked me straight in the eye. "Sam, talk to me about what happened with AJ. Don't you trust me?"

I did trust her, more than she knew. "Brenda, you know the story. He came in, we started seeing each other, more or less, you know. And I don't know, maybe he thought he was responsible for Simon getting to me, I don't know why he stuck around as long as he did." I blinked and looked down. "You know, I never expected him to stay. He has a life in New York. I knew from the beginning that this wasn't going to be a permanent thing."

"You mean to tell me that there is not any part of you that cares?" she asked softly.

"I didn't say that," I told her harshly. Of course I cared. "What I said—"

"So why did you let him go?" she demanded.

"What was I supposed to do, beg him to stay?"

"If you want something bad enough, Sam, you could have it."

"That's not always true, Brenda." I wished it were.

"So he just up and decided today that he was leaving?"

I nodded. "He said he had things he had to handle in New York."

"And this just came up out of the blue?"

Goddess, she was more upset about this than Rafe was. "He has a life there," I reminded her. "His life isn't here."

A disapproving look came over her face. "And so that's it then," she said softly. "Do you want him in your life?"

"That's not the issue," I whispered sadly.

"Sam, that's the only issue," she insisted.

"It's not the issue, Brenda," I repeated firmly. "You know, how would you feel if you knew that Rafe had a life in New York, if he was just here to visit and he had a job there and you knew he had people he saw there, like Nick." I hated to bring Rafe's ex-boyfriend into this but it was the only way I could explain how I felt.

"How would you feel if he was only in town for a week or two and spent that time with you but you knew he had to go back to New York?" I demanded. "How would you feel? Would you be trying to force you into his life? Or would you just enjoy the time with him and let him go?"

"I'd be willing to do whatever I had to," she said simply.

"Like you did with Michael?"

Her face went blank. "What do you mean?"

"Rafe told me that you and he dated," I told her, "that you were pretty serious, and he just up and took off."

"That's true."

"You didn't try to get him back or chase after him, or anything else," I added.

"I probably would have if I had known where he was," she replied

"Well, maybe that's the difference between you and me." I wasn't willing to throw myself at someone who obviously didn't want me in his life.

"And it took me two years to get past it," she said coolly.

"Maybe it'll take me two years to get past it," I said harshly. "It's something I have to live with."

"You're making a mistake, Sam," she warned me, dropping her hand and stepping back. "I know I can't tell you what to do and I'm not going to try to."

"That may be," I admitted, "but it's my mistake."

"I guess you're right."

There was nothing left for me to say. I stood there and looked at her, sure I was doing the right thing. After all, it would be wrong of me to trap AJ into a more permanent arrangement, not matter how tempting that was.

The look she gave me almost shattered my resolve. It told me how disappointed she was in me, how she couldn't believe I was giving up so easily.

"You know, some things just aren't meant to be." I would have said more, but the tears finally overcame me. I turned and leaned on the sink with my head down, fighting the sobs that shook me.

Brenda came closer again and laid a hand on my back. "I understand more than you realize what you're feeling," she said softly. "And you have a chance to carve your own destiny out of this situation. I'm not going to say anything more. If you need to talk, you know where I am."

"I appreciate that," I said once I had control over my voice again.

I could feel the disappointment emanating from her as she turned and left the room. I turned on the water to cover the sound of her voice from the living room; I really didn't want to hear what she said to Rafe. Cupping my hands beneath the running water, I splashed water on my face and tried to clear my head.

Was I wrong to dismiss AJ so quickly from my life? Would it have done any good if I'd begged him to stay? I really couldn't see where it would. I wasn't some glamorous model with looks and money and charm to keep him coming back for more.

A moment later I heard a step behind me.

"I'm sorry," Rafe said quietly.

I turned to look at him, hugging my waist. "For what?"

"For what I said earlier," he told me. "About you needing someone to take care of you."

I nodded and looked down. "It's okay," I replied softly. He was my brother, after all, and he just wanted what was best for me.

He came over and put his arms around me. "I don't know what happened with you and AJ and I know you don't want to talk about it," he said gently. "But can you at least let me know if I can do something to help you?"

"I will, Rafe," I promised him.

He kissed my temple and smiled reassuringly at me. I nodded once to show him I was all right. A few minutes later he was gone and I was alone with my grief.

HUSH

RILEY: WELL, I GUESS WE HAVE TO TALK.

BUFFY: I GUESS WE DO.

Corrine called Thursday and invited me for lunch. I was still feeling a little nauseous from my last bout of morning sickness, but I wanted to see her so I agreed. We met at the House of the Seven Gables and I tried to be up and positive but she saw through it right away.

"Are you sleeping well?" she asked as we sat down. "Gosh, you look tired."

I smiled wryly. "Thanks."

"I don't mean to say you look bad, but... is everything okay?"

"Yeah." And everything would be okay, in time.

She reached out and laid a hand on my arm. "You sounded a little odd on the phone."

"I'm fine, really," I told her. I picked up the menu and tried to find something that would interest my stomach. Nothing looked good so I finally settled for soup.

We talked about school for a little while, and Brian. She really liked him, and I knew without asking that he really liked her too.

"So how's AJ?" she asked me.

What could I tell her but the truth? "I assume he's doing well."

"What do you mean you assume?"

"He went back to New York," I told her.

"Why?"

"That's where he lives, you know?" I asked dryly. "Works, does all his stuff, he went back to New York."

Shock was written all over her face. Why was I the only one not surprised that AJ had gone home?

"Don't look so shocked, he lives in New York," I reminded her.

"But I thought..."

I shook my head. "He was only there for a couple of weeks, and he stayed a little longer because I was sick and when I wasn't sick he went back. It's no big."

She looked uncomfortable, and I changed the subject back to Brian. She was just starting to relax a little when the nausea swept over me again. I quickly excused myself and hurried to the rest room where I barely made it to a stall.

Min kept telling me to breathe, and once I listened to him I was able to get past the sickness. I knew I'd taken too long when I heard Corrine come into the bathroom.

"Samantha? Are you all right?" she asked softly.

"Yeah," I told her, wiping the tears from my eyes. "I'm fine."

"Are you sick?"

"The soup just didn't settle well on my stomach," I told her as I came out of the stall and went to the sink. I washed my face and rinsed out my mouth, and I could feel her eyes on me the entire time.

"I'm sorry," I said softly. I felt really guilty for ruining her lunch. "I just really haven't felt good lately."

"For how long?" she asked softly.

"Not very long," I assured her. "I'll get over it, it's the flu or something."

Or something, Min added.

When she just kept looking at me, I met her eye in the mirror. "I'm fine, don't worry about it. Let's just go back and I'll have some water and I'll feel better."

"Have you been to a doctor?"

"I don't need to go to the doctor for the flu," I said evasively.

"Uh-huh. I think you should go to the doctor and get checked out."

Since I already had a doctor's appointment, I saw no harm in agreeing. "Maybe I will."

"What does your Avatar tell you?" she asked suddenly.

I looked at her in surprise. "About what?"

"About your physical condition?"

"He says that I'll be fine, don't worry about it."

She wasn't buying it. "In how long?"

You might as well tell her, Min advised. *She's just as stubborn as you are. She'll be just as strong too, once her Avatar awakens fully.*

I looked away from her probing eyes. "About eight months," I muttered as I wiped the rest of the water from my face.

"You know," she drawled after a moment's silence, "my dad was known for three counties to be able to tell when a young woman was... expecting."

"Yeah?"

"He taught me the fine points of it," she told me.

I just shook my head and tossed the paper towel in the trash bin.

"When are you going to a doctor?" she asked.

"I have an appointment tomorrow morning," I admitted without looking at her.

"Would you like someone to go with you?"

I don't know why, but her offer surprised me. "I really, really would."

"What time?"

"Ten," I said with a sigh.

She came over and hugged me, something I more than appreciated. It felt good to have someone I could talk to about this, someone other than Min.

"Will you please, please not say anything to Brian?" I asked softly.

"I'm not going to say anything to Brian," she promised. "AJ?"

"He doesn't know."

"Are you going to tell him?" she asked as she pulled away to look at my face.

"I don't know what to do," I told her. "I don't want to trap him."

"I understand." She wiped the tears from my cheeks. "You're going to have to tell him sooner or later."

"But there's time," I protested. "There's time."

"Have you talked to him at all since he left?"

I closed my eyes. "No."

She squeezed my shoulder. "Let's get out of here. This isn't depressing, this is good."

"It is a good thing," I agreed. In eight months I'd have a part of AJ that I could hold and love. I wasn't about to complain.

"It's very good," she told me.

"Yes." We smiled at each other and she waited while I washed my face again.

We went back and I nibbled on crackers while she finished eating. I felt much better, I think more because I had someone I could talk to about this than anything else.

CONSEQUENCES

BUFFY: JUST LET ME TALK TO GILES, OKAY? I SWEAR...

FAITH: NO! WE'RE NOT BRINGING *ANYBODY* ELSE INTO THIS.

"How are you feeling?" Corrine asked when I let her in the house the next morning.

I smiled through my nausea. "Well, you know why they call it morning sickness."

"I'm sorry," she murmured.

"This is definitely not your fault," I reminded her, trying not to laugh.

"I hope not," she agreed, grinning.

When I offered her a soft drink, she told me she'd just had breakfast, which sent waves of nausea flowing through me. As we walked out to my car I turned the conversation to a different subject and asked her how her date with Brian had gone.

"He was the perfect gentleman," she said softly. "We went out to dinner at the Dragon's Wing."

I recognized the name of the restaurant Brian liked to frequent. "Oh, he likes that place."

"Yes, it's nice, very nice."

She was being quiet, too quiet for what I knew of her personality. "And...?"

"And we came back to my apartment and watched a movie," she continued hesitantly.

"What did you watch?"

"Just something that I had at home. I'm a movie buff, a little," she explained. "A lot. So what did you do last night?"

I hid a groan as I started the car. "Argued with my Avatar."

She looked at me in surprise. "About what?"

"AJ," I told her, pulling out of the drive.

A glance at her face told me she was willing to listen if I was ready to talk, but I really wasn't, not yet.

"Things will work out in the end however they were meant to be," she assured me after a moment.

"I know they will," I agreed. "Funny thing about Avatars, you can't exactly shut them up, or get away from them. Ever."

"I wouldn't know, yet." Her voice was sad, almost wistful. Corrine had told me once that her Avatar only showed up in her dreams.

"So you're studying with Jared?" I asked, grateful for the change of subject.

"I'll see him Tuesday because I'm going home this afternoon for the weekend."

"Has he said anything about doing any kind of training?" Rachael had called me the night before and tried to set up a training schedule, but I had put her off, telling her I still didn't feel well. It wasn't a lie.

"Well, we started some stuff over in Ireland," she told me, "and I've been practicing the meditation exercises that he gave me to do. I'm sure I'll find out some more when we talk on Tuesday."

"Jared is a really nice guy." I'd known him for years, and he was a good teacher.

"He seems to be," she agreed. "He's given up an awful lot just to teach me."

"He's taught other people before, you know?" Rachael had told me about several young mages that Jared had taken under his wing.

"Yeah, but he probably knew them," she declared. "I'm like a stranger off the street kind of thing. I think he's doing it partially because he knew Mac and Eliza before."

I glanced at her in surprise. "He knew them before?"

She nodded. "Yeah."

"Before Mac died?" That must have been nearly twenty years ago. Jared didn't really look any older than thirty so he must have been young. "I didn't realize that."

"I don't know the extent of the relationship they had," she replied, "but I think that he's a little, I don't know, it's almost like he's indebted."

I made a mental note to ask Rachael about it. "But I know that he likes to teach, so don't think that he's doing this when he doesn't want to," I said as I pulled into the parking lot of the doctor's office.

After I parked the car, I sat there for a moment to take a deep breath.

"You okay?" Corrine asked.

I smiled at her. "I'm fine, just a little nervous."

"It will be all right, you know," she said softly, taking my hand.

"I know," I whispered. After taking another moment to calm myself, we went inside.

The actual doctor's visit went pretty well. She told me the baby was doing fine, and that we were both healthy so there was nothing to worry about. I ignored Min's comments about the perils of modern medicine and set up a schedule of appointments to see me through my pregnancy.

When we were done, Corrine and I picked up some food from a drive through and took it back to my house where we sat in the backyard on a blanket. It was quiet there, peaceful too, until Corrine brought up the subject of AJ once more.

"Have you thought about telling AJ?" she asked softly.

I refused to look at her. "I've thought about it."

"But you're not going to."

It wasn't a question, so I didn't feel like I had to answer her.

"Sam," she said hesitantly, "don't you think he has the right to know about the baby?"

He does, Min chimed in.

I took a deep breath and finally looked at her. "Don't you think he has the right to live his life without being trapped into something he never asked for?" I asked softly.

"I think you should give him the opportunity to decide," she replied quickly.

"But it wouldn't be his decision, Corrine," I protested. "Don't you see that? I've already taken that decision out of his hands? If I tell him then he'll have no choice but to be responsible for the baby."

She frowned, and I could tell that she didn't agree. "Have you told your brother yet? Or Brian?"

"Goddess no," I breathed. "Either one of them would go straight to AJ and force him to come back to Salem. I couldn't live with that."

"Don't you think it's going to be obvious pretty soon here?" she demanded not unkindly. "Someone is bound to notice when you start gaining weight."

I looked down. "I know."

"Then tell them," she urged. "We can call them right now, I know—"

"No," I said harshly, then instantly regretted it. "I'm sorry, Corrine. I know I have to tell them, but I'm not ready yet."

"Soon?"

I nodded. "Soon."

CHOICES

WILLOW: WHAT DO YOU MEAN, I CAN'T?

BUFFY: I WON'T LET YOU.

WILLOW: OF THE TWO PEOPLE HERE, WHICH IS THE BOSS OF ME?

Saturday morning I went out to the garden. The cool breeze from the ocean only a few miles away made the air a little chilly, but I didn't mind. I sat underneath the tall willow tree and shredded its leaves to keep my hands occupied. It was hard not to picture AJ there with me like he'd been only a few days ago.

If he's your Iowa, Min murmured, why not tell him and see what he does?

"That's not the way it works," I whispered to him in the silence of the garden. "We were getting ready to move to Iowa when my parents died, Min. They were so excited and Rafe and I were too. When they died in that car accident, Rafe and I thought that if we could just get to Iowa, somehow they'd be there waiting."

But they were dead, he reminded me.

"I know," I said softly, closing my eyes in remembered pain. "That's the whole point. Rafe and I wanted to go to Iowa so badly, we knew it would be perfect. Eventually we realized that we could never be with our parents again. That's when the meaning for Iowa changed for us. Now, for us Iowa is something that you want so badly but can never have, never achieve."

I understand, he said sadly.

"I always wanted to see Iowa," I whispered. Then an idea stuck in my mind. I could go to Iowa, move there before my pregnancy became obvious. I would keep the news secret and by the time Rafe and AJ found out the truth, I'd be halfway across the country. AJ wouldn't bother to come after me, and the distance would help with Rafe, too.

Sure it will, Min said sarcastically. One or both of them will come after you as soon as they find out.

I just couldn't agree with him. I went inside the house to the den to pull out an old Atlas and turned to Iowa. Mom's handwriting was still in the margin, with a big star around Sioux City. That's where I'd go, to the town our parents had planned on moving us to. We had cousins there if I wasn't mistaken. It didn't take me long to find the number in mom's old address book.

My cousin was more than happy to help me, and she said she had an empty room I could stay at until I found my own place. I thanked her, knowing that I didn't have enough money saved up to be able to refuse her offer.

Monday I called and made arrangements for my academic credits to transfer to Iowa State. It would be hard to go to class and not say anything to Corrine, but I had to do it. I couldn't afford to miss class just when I was transferring.

Just before sundown on Monday, Rafe showed up on my doorstep. I hadn't expected him to begin with since he'd just stopped in that morning to check on me, and certainly not at that time of day. He'd told me once that he liked to be with Brenda when she woke up.

I'd packed up my books in the den was just getting ready to go to class when he barged into the house. I knew I had to keep him away from that part of the house or he'd try to talk me out of leaving. I hadn't told Rafe about my plans to move away, and I didn't intend to. He'd just get all over protective and insist I stay in Salem, the one thing I knew I couldn't do.

"Why did you tell him to go back to New York?" Rafe demanded the minute he walked in the door.

"What are you talking about?" I asked him, tucking my hair behind my ear.

"AJ," he replied angrily. "Why did you make him leave?"

"I didn't make him leave," I scoffed, walking toward the kitchen for a glass of juice. It seemed like I was always thirsty now, and I'd changed my drinking habits for the baby's sake. "You know as well as I do that he doesn't want a long term relationship with me."

"No, I don't know that," he told me, grabbing my shoulder and turning me around to face him. "He wanted to stay here and you wouldn't even hear of it. Why?"

"Oh, goddess," I whispered, appalled. "You went to New York."

"Yeah," he admitted with satisfaction. "And a good thing I did, too. He heard what you said when he left."

"What do you mean?"

"He told me he heard you say 'Goodbye, Iowa.' He asked me what that meant."

I stared up at him in horror. "You didn't tell him, did you?"

"Of course not, Sam," he exclaimed impatiently. "What was I supposed to say? 'AJ, my sister thinks you're perfect, but for some reason, she just wants to fuck you?'"

My hand shot out and caught him hard across the cheek. "How dare you?" I demanded. "Just because you're my brother doesn't mean you have the right to intrude in my life this way."

He looked down at me with shock on his face. "Samantha, I just want you to be happy. Why can't you see that? If he's your Iowa—"

"That's just it," I told him. "I don't want you to pressure him into staying with me just because you're trying to protect your little sister. He doesn't love me, Rafe, and I don't want his pity." To my horror, I started to cry.

Rafe stared at me for a moment, then gathered me into his arms. He led me into the kitchen where he sat down on one of the stools and pulled me onto his lap. He held me for a long time, until my tears finally stopped, then he sat me down and brought over a box of tissues.

"Do you want a soda?" he asked softly.

I shook my head. "A glass of juice?"

He went to the refrigerator and stood looking into it for a moment, then poured juice for both of us. He brought it over and sat down beside me. "Do you want to talk about it, Sam?"

After I dried my face, I looked up at him. "What would you have done if Brenda hadn't loved you, Rafe?" I asked sadly. "Would you have wanted her to stay with you out of pity, or obligation?"

"Sam, AJ cares about you," he protested softly.

"Would you have been happy with that?" I insisted, pleading with him to understand. "Or would it have ripped up your insides every time you looked at her? And how would you have felt if I'd gone to Brenda behind your back to talk about it?"

He shook his head helplessly. "I didn't think about that when I went to New York, Sam. I'm sorry." He reached out and put his hand over mine. "You've been so different since AJ left, I really thought he'd walked out on you."

I smiled sadly. "I don't want to be with someone who just 'cares' for me, Rafael. I want what you have with Brenda. I want a love so overwhelming that I can't think straight. I want..."

"AJ," Rafe whispered knowingly. He was studying me intensely, and I couldn't help but wonder why.

"You might as well say Iowa," I told him simply. "AJ lives a totally different life than I do. He has all these beautiful women who would love to be with him. I can't compete." I glanced at my brother to see that he was frowning. "What's the matter?"

He blinked and met my eyes. "Are you sick?"

My stomach tightened painfully. I knew it was nearly impossible to lie to Rafe, he'd always seemed to know if anyone he met was telling the truth. I tried to think quickly, but my mind was spinning. "I'm not sick," I said. Technically, pregnancy wasn't an illness.

I watched his eyes narrow as he weighed my words, then he smiled. "I just don't want you to make yourself sick over this, Sam. And I don't want you to feel like I'm the overprotective big brother, either. You'll let me know if you need anything?"

"I will," I told him. "If I need anything, you'll be the first to know. Now, isn't Brenda going to be worried if you're not home soon?" It was just after sundown, and Brenda would be awake by now.

He glanced at the clock and swore softly. As he reached for his cell phone, he said, "Do you want me to stay here with you for a while?"

"No," I replied firmly. "I'll be fine. I'm late for class, anyway."

When Brenda answered the phone, Rafe explained where he was and told her he'd be home soon.

"Rafe," I said softly, not knowing if this would be the last time that I saw him before I left. "I love you, and I know that you're just trying to do what's best for me."

"I just want you happy, Sam," he said, pulling me into his arms for another hug. "I love you. If I don't take care of you, who will?"

"Me?" I suggested. "I'll call you in a couple days, okay?"

"Sure, sis," he agreed, kissing my cheek. "Then maybe we can talk about AJ again."

I rolled my eyes and punched his arm playfully. "Maybe not." I walked with him to the door and watched him leave. I knew he'd be mad when he found out I was gone, but I hoped he would eventually come to understand the choices I'd made.

WILD AT HEART

WILLOW: OZ... DON'T YOU LOVE ME?

OZ: MY WHOLE LIFE... I'VE NEVER LOVED ANYTHING ELSE.

By the time Rachael and I had finished packing the car, it was close to four o'clock. We were saying our good-byes when Brian pulled in the driveway. He looked from the loaded car to my face for a moment, then glanced at Rachael.

She looked at me in sympathy. She knew I was hoping to leave before anyone else found out I was going. "Call me when you get there, Sam," she whispered as she hugged me goodbye. "Good luck." She didn't like me leaving, but she understood, even though I hadn't told her everything.

"Thanks," I said wryly, knowing I'd need it.

"Hey, Brian," she said to my cousin.

"Hey." He didn't even glance at her, just looked at me thoughtfully.

I watched Rachael walk into her house next door before I turned to Brian. "What's up?" I asked him innocently.

"Running away?" he asked softly.

Giving him an angry look, I turned and went back into the house for the last of my things. He followed, as I knew he would.

"What are you doing, Sam?" he asked once we were inside.

"Moving," I answered, walking toward the kitchen. I was thirsty again, and I knew that there was a little juice left in the refrigerator.

"Why?" He sat down at the counter while I poured myself a drink.

"It's time for a change," I told him. "Rafe's never going to admit I'm an adult, and for that matter, neither are you."

"So this has nothing to do with AJ?"

I sighed. "Why should it have anything to do with him?" I leaned against the counter and sipped from my glass, not looking at my cousin.

It has everything to do with him and you know it, Samantha, Min told me.

"That's good," Brian said, but I could tell that he wasn't convinced. "So, why didn't you tell anyone you were planning on moving?"

"Because I knew you guys would try and talk me out of it," I replied, coming over to sit down beside him.

"Are you moving to Boston?" I think he assumed that because Boston was where I went to college.

"No," I said slowly. "A little further away."

"Where then?"

"Sioux City." I took a drink of my juice and waited for the explosion. When it didn't come, I glanced up at him.

"Well, if you've got a couple days drive ahead of you, I'd better check a few things on your car," he told me amicably, rising to his feet.

"I checked the oil and the radiator," I told him. "You don't have to check anything, I'm actually ready to go."

"Now, Sam," he protested, "you wouldn't want to break down in the middle of nowhere, would you? Just let me check a few things."

I glanced at the clock; it was quarter past four. How long could it possibly take? I wanted to be gone in case Brenda and Rafe decided to visit tonight, but it was an hour and a half before sundown. "All right," I agreed. "I'd appreciate it."

He smiled and kissed my cheek, making me frown. Brian was entirely too happy about this whole thing, he should have been trying to talk me into staying, not helping me leave.

Maybe he's up to something, Min suggested.

Like what? I asked. Min had no answer.

Nearly two hours later I was beginning to believe I knew what Brian was up to. He'd already replaced the spark plugs and changed the oil, but now he was trying to tell me that I needed to have my tires rotated before I could leave.

"No, Brian," I said firmly. "I'll barely make Albany before I'll have to stop as it is. I'm leaving now."

"Can't you just wait until tomorrow?" he pleaded.

"Why, so you can call Rafe and tell him I'm leaving?" I asked harshly. "No way. I'm out of here."

"You know, you've always acted like this timid mouse," he told me with a chuckle. "Like if anyone said 'boo' you'd run the other way. You've changed, Sam, blossomed. It's like you've always been wild at heart and now you're just finding that part of yourself."

"Wild at heart, huh," I replied with a smile. "I don't know about that, but I am definitely learning things about myself I would never have thought possible." *Thanks to Min.*

You're welcome, the Avatar replied.

"I like the new you," Brian said firmly, giving me a brief hug. "I'm going to miss seeing the rest of your transformation with you gone to Iowa."

"I'll still visit," I insisted. "We won't lose touch, I promise. You can come see me in Sioux City and maybe in a couple of years I'll move back home."

"Why did you say you had to move again?" he asked, glancing at something behind me.

"I need some space, some time away from everything, Brian," I whispered, looking down. "I have to face up to the way things are. I'll never be beautiful, or glamorous, or anything else that—" I stopped myself before I could reveal everything to my cousin, but he already knew where I was going.

"That AJ wants? You're wrong, Sam," he declared fiercely. "You haven't been looking in the mirror lately. You are beautiful, and I know AJ doesn't need glamorous. If he did he would have married any of a dozen girls in the last few years. That's not what he wants."

"What does he want then, hot shot?" I shot at him, angry.

"You."

I stiffened at the sound of AJ's voice behind me. Brian smiled, and I felt like slapping the satisfaction from his face.

Told you, Min chortled.

"I guess I'll be going now," Brian said quickly, darting for the door.

"Thanks, man," AJ told him as they clasped hands.

I heard the door close and gathered my courage to turn around. When I did, AJ was leaning against the closed door with his arms crossed, smiling.

LOVER'S WALK

SPIKE: I MAY BE LOVE'S BITCH, BUT AT LEAST I'M MAN ENOUGH TO ADMIT IT.

"What's so funny?" I demanded. I hadn't seen AJ in weeks, and my eyes drank in his appearance.

"Brian," he replied. "He ran out of here like he thought you were going to skin him alive."

"I might have," I muttered darkly. "He knew you were coming, didn't he?"

AJ nodded. "He called me and said you were doing something stupid."

"Stupid!" I exclaimed, angry.

It was stupid, Sam, Min told me.

You're not helping, I warned him.

"What are you running from, Sam?" he asked, still smiling.

"I'm not running, AJ," I told him firmly. "I'm moving. Away."

"Why?"

"Does everyone think they need a full accounting of my reasons?" I demanded irritably. "I think it's best, that's all you need to know." I turned and walked into the kitchen, suddenly thirsty again.

He followed me. "Okay, if you don't want to tell me why, will you at least tell me where?"

It seemed a reasonable enough request. "Sioux City." I took a glass down from the cupboard and ran water from the sink to fill it.

"Iowa?" he asked. "What's in Iowa?"

I sat the empty glass on the counter. "Sioux City," I repeated without turning. My stomach started to remind me it was there; I guess I'd drunk the water too fast, suddenly I felt very nauseous.

"Is there someone you know there?"

He was standing close to me now, too close. I could smell his after shave, and the man beneath. While normally I would have liked the smell, now I had to swallow to hold the bile down.

"Yes," I said in a small voice. "I have a cousin who lives there."

"Are you leaving because of me?" His voice sounded strange, as if it hurt him to ask me that. "Because I'm moving to Salem?"

He was moving to Salem? I turned to look up at him and the movement was too much for my stomach. I ran past him out of the kitchen, through the bedroom and into the bathroom where I quickly emptied my stomach.

Breathe, Min reminded me. *Ah, yes,* he added just before I felt a cool wash cloth pressed to my forehead.

I sagged against the cabinet and AJ was there to catch me. He cradled me against him and washed my face off, then reached up for a glass of water he'd sat on the counter.

"Rinse out your mouth," he told me, "but don't swallow it."

I did as he directed, and I felt much better. I rested my head against his chest and closed my eyes.

"Are you all right?" he asked softly.

"It goes away," I told him with a small nod.

"Has this been happening a lot?"

His hand rubbing down my back felt too good for me to think about what I was saying. "Not really."

Abruptly his hand dropped away. "Were you even going to tell me, Sam?" he asked in a low voice.

I lifted my head to see real anger in his eyes. Damn. I braced myself on the cabinet and rose unsteadily to my feet. "That I've been throwing up?"

"Don't play stupid," he retorted. "Were you going to tell me? Or is it not mine?"

It would have been so easy to let him think that Simon was the father, and so wrong. I turned away before replying, but still I couldn't quite bring myself to lie to him. "You don't have to feel obligated to me, AJ," I told him firmly. "I can take care of myself."

I walked out of the bathroom and through the bedroom into the den where my jacket and purse were sitting on a low table. As I bent to pick them up, AJ grabbed my arm and spun me to face him. The room tilted around me, and I swayed on my feet, stopped from falling only by AJ's hold on me.

He led me over to a chair and eased me down carefully. "Are you in such a rush to leave?" he asked. "Do you want to get away from me that badly?"

I leaned back in the chair and closed my eyes. "I've made plans, AJ. I wanted to leave hours ago. You told Brian to come here, didn't you?" I said accusingly, looking up at him. "You told him to make sure I was here when you got here."

"I'm glad I did," he admitted. "If I hadn't, you'd be gone."

"How did you know I was leaving?"

"A good guess." He sighed and crouched in front of me. "Sam, I came back because wanted to see you again."

Don't blow this, Sam, Min ordered in my head.

I ignored him. "Why?" I demanded of AJ.

"Does there have to be a reason?"

Isn't it enough that he came back? Min asked.

"Well you didn't come back just to see my blue eyes," I said dryly.

"Actually, I did," he replied honestly. "I missed you, Sam. I didn't like leaving you the way I did."

I barely stopped myself from telling him I hadn't much liked him leaving either. It was for the best, wasn't it? He didn't need to be tied down with a child and a woman he didn't want.

"Why did you come back?" I asked sharply.

"To ask you to marry me," he whispered, reaching out to tuck a piece of hair behind my ear. "I want to be with you."

"Because of the baby," I said accusingly.

Don't be a fool, Min cried.

"No," AJ told me with a smile. "Because I love you, Sam."

I just sat there blinking at him in surprise. AJ, world renowned author and millionaire, love me? I couldn't believe it.

"It's true," he insisted, taking my hand. "I didn't want to leave but I thought you needed some space. I knew I had some things to take care of in New York anyway so I could move to Salem."

"But, but I'm not—"

"Not what?" he asked before I could finish. "You are kind and wonderful and a beautiful person, Samantha. I love you."

He didn't look like he was lying, but how could this be the truth? "Why would you love me?" I whispered, not knowing what else to say. "I'm not beautiful or rich or famous."

"You are beautiful," he insisted. "And I have enough money and fame for the both of us."

I just shook my head. There was no way he'd be happy with me after the women he'd been with in his life.

His face closed up. "I'm sorry, Sam," he said softly. "I thought that you were starting to have feelings for me. I'd hoped we could build on that, that you could come to love me. I'm sorry, I won't bother you again."

He stood up and looked down at me for a long silent moment, his eyes full of anguish. Then he turned and walked toward the door.

Are you going to let him walk away like this? Min demanded. *Will you just going to throw it all away because you are too stupid to see that he loves you?*

"No, I won't!" I cried, coming to my feet.

AJ stopped and turned around to look at me in surprise. "What?"

"I won't 'come to love' you, AJ," I told him firmly. "I can't because I already do. I just didn't want you to settle for someone like me when you could have anyone you wanted."

He smiled and walked back toward me. "Anyone?" When I nodded, he took me into his arms. "That's good then," he whispered in my ear, "because I want you."

"You aren't mad about the baby?" I asked hesitantly.

"Not at all, Sam," he assured me. "I was hoping I could talk you into starting a family soon. You must have been reading my mind."

Not yet, Min whispered. *Soon.*

I laughed and threw my arms around AJ's neck. He lifted me off the ground and kissed me. All my doubts fell away and I surrendered my fears to his love.

"What do you think about a Christmas wedding?" he asked a few hours later as he pulled the blankets up over our bodies.

"That soon?" I asked trying not to yawn.

"I think you're going to have a hard time finding a dress as it is," he reminded me.

"Whatever you want," I told him.

He kissed my temple and I fell into a peaceful sleep.