



Caitlyn: Secret Dreams

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FAMILY

I KNOW THIS MUCH IS TRUE
SPANDAU BALLET — TRUE

I awoke as the sun sank below the horizon in my bedroom at Sabrina's house. My eyes took in the stark simplicity of the room and I sat up throwing my long dark braid over my shoulder.

From the next room I heard Duckie moving around. Howard T. Duke was a lot older than I, but despite my Asian heritage, Duckie was a brother to me in every way that mattered.

I got up and dressed in a simple pair of loose slacks and a dark shirt before going downstairs to see Sabrina Lewis and her boyfriend Jeff Thiele. Sabrina looked about twenty, but I knew she was much, much older. She was a recluse from every society that mattered, indulging herself in only three things; her painting, making wine, and her family.

Jeff was about the same age that Sabrina looked, and he too was a recluse for much the same reason Sabrina was. He enjoyed her paintings and wine, and he sparred with me often. Sometimes he even let me win.

He was cooking in the kitchen when I entered it, and Sabrina was sipping at a glass of red wine. She had on a bathing suit and looked like she was ready to hit the pool that took up much of the back yard.

I walked to her side and kissed her cheek. "Good evening, Sabrina, Jeff," I said softly.

She returned my kiss. "Did you sleep well?"

"Like the dead," I replied with a smile.

Jeff groaned at my pun, but Sabrina grinned. "Want to swim with me?"

At that moment Duckie entered the kitchen behind me. "Love to," he said.

I turned. "Not quite dressed for it, are you?"

He wore black jeans, a striped long sleeve shirt and a black vest. The dark clothing set off his pale skin, blond hair and straight teeth as he smiled at me. "Neither are you."

"You two go change and I'll meet you by the pool," Sabrina told us.

We walked upstairs side by side, silently parting at the doors of our rooms. I undressed and put on my one-piece black swimsuit, a modest affair I had picked up several years ago. When I went back downstairs, Duckie was in the hot tub and Sabrina was doing laps in the pool.

I jumped in and followed her back and forth across the expanse of water for a while, then I went to the side of the hot tub and began splashing water on Duckie as he leaned against the side, his eyes closed.

At the first cold water that touched him, he opened his eyes and peered at me patiently. I dove across the barrier into the hot tub and tried to dunk him, but after a moment he threw me easily back into the pool. My five-foot frame and slight build made it easy for him to throw me around.

I surfaced, laughing. Sabrina swam to my side and whispered softly in my ear. I nodded, and she climbed out of the pool quietly, walking to stand behind Duckie. At her nod, I dove once more into the hot tub and grabbed Duckie's legs, wedging myself against the side and pulling him down.

I felt Duckie jerk and heard a muted splash. He kicked hard against my stomach and I was pushed away under water. I surfaced to see him climbing out of the water and running for the water hose.

I dashed after him quickly, the world a blur of movement around me. I reached his side near the edge of the walk, but I slipped in the wet grass and went tumbling to the ground before I could grab the hose. I gathered myself, struggling not to laugh, and launched myself at him as he picked up the hose. We wrestled for a minute before he got me into a head lock and turned the hose on my braided hair. I tried to get loose, but I was laughing too loud.

"You're not the only one with a few moves," he told me, his voice full of mirth. "Just because I don't like to fight, doesn't mean I can't."

I just laughed harder and stomped on his foot. Startled, he released me before sliding in the grass and falling, still clutching the hose. I reached down and yanked it from his hand, pointing it at him, but the pressure fell suddenly and the water stopped flowing.

He got up laughing and walked back toward the pool. I put the hose back and followed him, stopping when just behind him when he realized that Sabrina stood across the pool with a super soaker in her hand.

She aimed for us and I ran toward Duckie, pushing him into the pool. Sabrina's laugh rang out and I heard Jeff's voice as my head broke the surface of the water.

"What are you guys doing?" he asked, obviously amused at our antics.

I looked up at Sabrina, and together we started toward Jeff, but he ran into the house. Duckie pounced on me in the water and I went under, twisting to bring him down with me. As we came up from the water, a roar sounded out and we looked up to see Jeff emerging from the house. He was covered with fur and taller than he'd been a few moments ago, bigger, and his face was half transformed into that of a wolf. Sabrina ran toward him and he grabbed her around the waist, falling into the pool with her in his arms.

Duckie and I quickly joined the fray, the three of us trying to pull Jeff under the water. He went too easily, and when he emerged we all went flying. I wiped the water from my eyes and watched Jeff return to human form. He walked up the pool steps naked and grabbed a towel to dry off.

"That's enough for tonight, childer," Sabrina said, still laughing. She climbed out of the pool and joined Jeff, who pulled her into his arms and kissed her passionately.

I averted my eyes from their love play and walked out of the pool, grabbing a towel and drying off as Duckie followed suit. Sabrina and Jeff's kiss was a reminder to us as to why they were both reclusive. Their love was forbidden by both Lupine and Vampire law.

Sabrina formed the cohesive glue for the four of us. We all loved her deeply, and would do anything for her. We loved each other too, although Duckie would sometimes get testy with Jeff because of what he was and the danger it presented to Sabrina. I knew how much she loved Jeff and accepted him because of it.

"Want to go out tonight, Caitlyn?" Duckie asked me softly.

"Do you have a gig tonight?" He was the lead singer and guitarist in a local band, and sometimes he asked me to sing with them.

"Nah, I just want to go have fun with my sister." He tapped me lightly on the shoulder with his fist and grinned.

"Sure," I told him. "Beat you to the shower!" I turned and ran inside, not noticing that Duckie didn't follow. When I reached the bathroom upstairs, Duckie was already there.

"Get out," he said with mock severity. "I got here first, you shower downstairs."

I backed out, laughing. He hadn't passed me on the way in, so I knew he must have jumped to the upper deck above the pool area and climbed up. Shaking my head, I grabbed a fresh towel and a robe before heading back downstairs.

Once I'd showered I went back upstairs and knocked on the bathroom door. "Duckie, where are we going?"

"That depends," came his muffled reply. "Do you want to have fun, or have *fun*?"

"Yes."

"Let's hit the TBA," he suggested.

"Okay." I pulled the towel off my head and ran it across my hair. I dressed simply in black loose pants and a Chinese style black shirt with double buttons down the front.

I heard Sabrina call Duckie from her studio across the hall as I began to brush my waist length hair. I started a French braid at the crown of my head and when Duckie knocked on my door a few minutes later I had half of my hair's length braided.

"Sabrina wants you to stop in for a minute," he told me.

"Okay," I replied.

"Tell her you like the painting," he suggested softly.

I nodded as I recalled hearing a variety of music coming from her studio. She often painted to music as it helped her to capture the mood of her work. If she was switching the style of music she was listening to, it meant she was having trouble with the painting.

Duckie went back to his room and I finished braiding my hair. I stood with a fluid grace I had achieved through years of studying the martial arts. When I used to compete in tournaments, I'd been told I had uncommon grace, even for a girl.

I went to Sabrina's studio and stood for a long moment, admiring her work. It was a large piece, easily eight feet high and ten feet wide. On one side of the painting was a beautiful daylight garden scene, on the other a dark and disturbing forest glade.

Sabrina seemed upset, as if she couldn't quite decide what to paint next. She was working halfheartedly on the garden, but there were large areas of the painting unfinished.

"Sabrina-san," I said quietly, adding the respectful 'san' to her name as I'd been taught as a child in the East.

"Caitlyn," she replied pleasantly, turning to face me.

I walked to her side and kissed her cheek. "You wanted to see me?"

"Nothing important," she told me as she turned back toward the painting. "I know that you and Duckie are going out this evening and I just wanted to remind you to take care."

"We're going to TBA," I said. "We shouldn't run into any trouble there."

"But the two of you together have this habit..." she said half in jest.

I smiled warmly. "I'll keep him out of trouble."

"I know," she replied, bringing her brush near the canvas. Before letting it touch, she backed away.

"Perhaps if you listened to something more upbeat," I suggested. "Perhaps David Sandborn instead of Metallica."

She shrugged. "Try it." When I walked to the stereo and changed disks, she tilted her head to the side, listening to the music. "Perhaps," she whispered, looking at the painting.

I headed for the door to leave her to her painting, but she called me back.

"If you see Duncan at TBA, could you have him call me?" she asked.

Duncan was the Toreador primogen, the head of our clan in the city. To my knowledge he was the only Kindred that she ever had contact with, other than Duckie and myself. Since Duncan owned the TBA, it wasn't unusual that she make this request, so I thought nothing of it.

"Sure," I replied. "I'll go see if Duckie's ready."

I moved quietly to his door and knocked, but got no reply. I opened the door a little to find him laying on his bed, dressed in the clothes he'd worn before we'd swam. He had large headphones on his ears, and his eyes were closed. Smiling, I walked over and lifted the headphones from his head.

His eyes popped open and he looked up at me in surprise. "Haven't I told you not to do that?" he said with mock severity.

"But I like to surprise you," I told him, holding the headphones to my ear. Before he snatched them out of my hand, I realized that he'd been listening to Bach. That was surprising as he usually listened to heavy metal. "You ready?"

He stood and we went downstairs to say goodbye to Jeff, who was on the computer in the den. When we said goodbye, he barely glanced up from the screen.

"Would you like to work out towards morning?" I asked.

He turned slightly. "Sure. When you guys get back?"

I smiled. "Yes." I enjoyed working out with Jeff, it kept me on my toes.

"There's a good movie on channel 52 you probably shouldn't miss," Duckie told him.

"Very funny," Jeff drawled, clicking the mouse and hiding a smile. "Benji, right?"

"Yeah," he replied, amused.

"Get lost," Jeff ordered good-naturedly.

"See ya," I added, pulling my brother out of the room. We went out to the garage and Duckie walked toward Sabrina's car. "We're taking her car?" I asked, surprised.

"That's what she wants," he told me.

We got in and drove toward the Las Vegas, the city of lights.

CAUSE AND EFFECT

EYES OF A FALLEN ANGEL

EYES OF A TRAGEDY

A PERFECT CIRCLE - THREE LIBRAS

As we traveled toward downtown, we joked back and forth, enjoying the easy banter of siblings that we had developed over the past ten years since I had come to live with Sabrina. Duckie parked in the lot at TBA and we went inside. There were both Kindred and mortals in the club but we bypassed both and sat at an empty table. When the waitress came over, I ordered a mineral water and we began to watch the crowd, talking now and then to a few people we knew.

About twenty minutes after our arrival, Duncan walked out of the back room. I excused myself and went over to him.

"Excuse me, sir," I said formally, bowing slightly at the waist.

He stopped and turned his intense hazel eyes on me. "Ah, you are Sabrina's childe, are you not?"

"Yes, sir," I replied. "Caitlyn Rose Lee."

"What can I do for you?"

"Mistress Sabrina asked respectfully that you call her this evening, sir," I told him.

He nodded. "I will."

"Thank you, sir." I bowed again and backed away before turning and rejoining Duckie, who was looking at his watch.

"We need to visit the clinic soon," he said softly.

I checked my own watch to find that it was eight thirty. "Why didn't you say something earlier?" I asked.

"We've got time," he replied, rising.

The clinic closed at nine o'clock, and I knew we would barely make it. Duckie and I had visited the clinic nearly every Wednesday night for the last five years. As Sabrina rarely left the house she preferred to keep her food supply on hand, and it was our job to pick it up for her. Duckie usually fed as she did, but I preferred to hunt for my food, only using the house supply when I absolutely had to.

We got to the clinic with a few minutes to spare and went to the back door of the building. I knocked softly and a familiar human male opened the door a minute later. I bowed slightly, but he just looked at Duckie.

"Forgot the case again, did you?" the man asked irritably.

Duckie grinned and shrugged. "We'll bring it back next week."

The man nodded and reached behind him to pull out a large cooler that he handed over to Duckie.

"Thank you," I said, smiling when the man winked at me.

My brother put the cooler in the trunk of the car and we returned to Sabrina's house where he loaded the supply in the small refrigerator that sat in the utility room. We decided to return to Vegas because he wanted to stop in at Everlasting Moments, a brothel downtown where he knew the security manager. As the business manager was a friend of mine, I readily agreed.

We pulled into the drive of the Victorian style mansion and Duckie got out, handing the keys to the valet before coming around and opening my door flamboyantly. We entered the house and went into the lounge area where there were many tables filled with people. Some tables had cages in the center of them, and each cage held a male or female exotic dancer who swayed to the sensual music filling the air. A runway jutted into the room from the far wall, and several dancers were at poles on the stage.

Duckie walked to the right of the room where his friend Robert sat at the DJ booth handling the lights and the music. I found an empty cageless table near the entry and sat down. I looked around for my friend Samantha, but I didn't see her in the room. Jack, one of the male dancers, came over to my table and began to gyrate before me.

I watched him, enjoying the flush of color on his near naked skin. I felt the heat coming off his body and distinctly smelled the blood within him, reminding me that I was hungry. I sat back and watched the play of his muscles as he danced quite close to me. I enjoyed watching humans move, remembering the feel of a heartbeat and the rush of air through my lungs.

Once I had taken Samantha up on her offer of the use of one of the house 'slaves'. He'd been tall and strong, and he'd pleased me greatly. However, I hadn't felt the need to repeat the experience, preferring to look but not touch.

The music dropped in volume and everyone began to applaud. I turned to see Tura, the Brujah primogen and owner of Everlasting Moments, enter the room with a group of Asian men and Samantha. Tura bowed slightly, her leather outfit gleaming darkly in the light of the room, then she raised her hands to stop the applause.

"Please, everyone," she protested, her voice low and sultry, "sit down, enjoy yourselves." She led the group to a large table in the center of the room where they all sat down.

Samantha waved to me and as the music resumed its former volume I waved back. When the song was over, the dancer kissed my cheek and moved on. I studied Tura's group for several minutes, then remembered that feeding on the guests was the exception, not the rule here at the brothel. A few minutes later Samantha led the men from the room.

I listened to the driving beat of the music, idly watching various dancers. I felt a bit hungry and was thinking about where I might feed later that evening when I felt a hand on my shoulder. It was Samantha, with one of the brothel's employees at her side. He was in his early twenties and tall, with short dark hair and blue eyes. I knew he was one of Tura's ghouls, and the white leather pants he wore accentuated his muscular legs.

"Hi, Caitlyn," my friend greeted me. She had shoulder length brown hair and smiling green eyes. Tonight she wore black leather and three-inch heels on her boots that made her almost ten inches taller than I was. "You remember Michael?"

I stood and bowed slightly. "Michael." I had met him once before and knew he was another ghoul of Tura's, but I really didn't know what he did at Everlasting Moments.

"Howard," Samantha said as my brother joined us. "This is Michael."

Duckie shook hands with the mortal and invited the two of them to sit down with us.

As she complied, Samantha said, "Michael wanted to talk with you, Caitlyn."

"About what?" I asked, turning to him.

"I have an interesting case I'd like your input on," he told me.

"Case?" I looked in confusion to Samantha.

"You don't know what I do here?" Michael asked. When I shook my head, he said, "I train new workers in dance or serving, or whatever they need training in."

"And you need my help?" I didn't understand why.

"Yes, I have an interesting subject new to the house," he told me. "He is having a hard time submitting himself to the training and I'd wondered if it could be his Judo training."

"Usually training in the martial arts requires a release of one's self," I informed him.

He smiled. "That's why I wanted you to take a look at him."

I glanced at Duckie, who simply grinned. "I suppose I could," I said hesitantly.

"Great!" Michael exclaimed. "Do you have time right now?"

When I nodded we all rose and followed Michael into the hall. As we traveled toward the elevator, I noticed that a door was open, a door that had been closed every other time I'd been to the brothel. A glance told me every prominent member of the Brujah clan was inside, some in suits, some in leather and jeans.

We got into the elevator and the guard closed the iron gate before tipping his little red hat at us. "Top floor?" When Michael nodded, he worked the elevator controls and we went upward quickly. At the third floor the guard opened the gate onto a large room where we could see many workers being put through different types of training by their handlers. I was a bit shocked to note that all of the workers were quite naked.

The room covered the entire third floor of the house and was divided into several training areas. To our right was a garden complete with large tropical trees and a small pool. To our left was a workout area and straight ahead partitions separated a few areas from the rest of the room.

Michael led us to an area where a female trainer stood before a man of about twenty-five that was kneeling at her feet. His body had several welts on it, evidently from the strap in the woman's hand.

"I know you can do better than that, David," the girl said harshly as we approached. "I am very disappointed in you." She was dressed all in white much the same as Michael, save that she wore a tank top instead of a poet's shirt.

"Alicia," Michael interrupted softly. "How are things going?"

"Not well," she replied irritably.

I took a close look at David. He knelt naked on the floor, his knees spread, his hand on his thighs. His eyes were shut tight and he seemed to be fighting himself, but not angry at his circumstances. I glanced at Duckie to see his reaction, and I could tell he was very disturbed by the situation.

Michael turned back to us. "David seems unable to release himself over to the experience," he told us.

"Those marks wouldn't have anything to do with it," Duckie drawled sarcastically.

"I'm sorry?" Michael prompted.

"He's been beaten," my brother replied hoarsely. "Maybe that's why he can't enjoy himself."

Michael chuckled softly. "Howard, all of our workers are voluntary contracts. These people want to be in this situation, and they are paid very well for the duration of their contract. They know before they sign on everything that is involved, and they still agree to the terms of the contract."

"You pay him so that you can beat him," Duckie murmured coolly.

"It's more than that," Michael protested with a smile. "The worker has to turn himself over to the experience. I'm told it is something akin to a revelation, and quite pleasurable."

"Sure," Duckie replied facetiously.

I had been watching David while Michael and my brother were talking, and now I walked closer to him. He tensed as I approached, sensing someone near even though I had moved almost silently. I knelt in a fluid motion before the man with my knees together and my hands on my thighs.

"David," I said sternly. He jumped slightly, but made no other movement. I could see the effort it took for him to relax. "David, look at me."

When he opened his eyes I was lost for a moment in their blue depths. I'd never seen anything like them, they were almost too striking to be real. I could understand why Michael wanted to bring him in line rather than release him from his contract.

I visualized myself as a powerful person. I knew my trick worked when his eyes opened wider and his pupil dilated a little further. Presence could be a wonderful power.

"I understand that you are having a problem," I said softly.

He closed his eyes and nodded.

"Look at me, David," I ordered. When he did, I asked if he wanted to talk about it.

He glanced at Michael, who had come over to observe.

"You may speak," Michael told him. "This is Mistress Caitlyn."

David looked back at me. "I want to give myself, but I cannot."

I noted that the way he responded to Michael was slightly different than the way he reacted to the female handler or to me. "Have you never had a female handler?"

He lowered his eyes to hide his unease. "No," he whispered.

"Is the fact Alicia is female the reason you can't give yourself over to her?" I could tell by the flush of his face and upper body that I'd guessed correctly. "David, I'm told that you have studied the marital arts," I said softly. "What style?"

"Judo," he murmured, looking down.

"Have you ever studied anything on Zen?" I asked.

He shook his head no and I could hear Duckie asking for a chair. I shot him a cool glance, then ignored him.

"Basically Zen is the art of learning from your experiences, no matter what they are," I told him. "If you open yourself up to your environment, you can learn much and walk away with great knowledge, both about the world and about yourself."

He looked up at me with a puzzled expression on his face.

"Hold out a fist," I instructed him.

Reluctantly, he did so.

I lifted my hand and made a pouring motion over his fist. "If I were to pour gold into your hand right now, you would not catch any of it. Your fist is closed, and in this way you have closed yourself from a gain and will walk away no richer than when you began. Now open your hand."

He held his hand flat, palm up.

"If I were to pour gold into your hand now, you would be able to catch some of it. In this way you have opened yourself to the gain, and will walk away a much richer man." I smiled

patiently. "Your mind is like a fist, David. Close it and you will gain nothing. Open it, and all the world may be yours."

I could see that he understood. "Yes, mistress," he replied.

Gracefully, I stood and walked over to Alicia. I politely asked for her strap and she readily gave it over, approval in her eyes. I strode purposefully back to David and made a loud cracking noise with the strap. He jumped, but I could tell there was a difference in his carriage.

"Michael," I said softly. "Are there some kind of paces you can put him through to test his responses?"

Alicia and Michael ran David through several tests involving fetching a ball. The woman gave him no quarter, and he seemed to respond well to her words and the strap she used on him.

"I'm pleased with his progress," Michael told me a few minutes later. "Thank you for your help. If you would like a job we do have an opening."

"Thank you, Michael, but no," I said with a polite bow. "I'm not sure how much I helped here, but I don't think I'm suited for this type of work."

"I think you're wrong," he replied with a thoughtful look. "But if you have no wish to train I cannot force you. However, the best trainers sometimes make the best submissives. If you would like, I could arrange your training in that area."

Glancing once more at David, I suppressed a shudder. "Again, thank you but no." As we walked toward the elevator I offered to train their handlers in the martial arts. He seemed interested, and told me he would make my offer known to the employees.

"Normally we pay our consultants," he added.

"That is not necessary," I told him.

"I must insist," he countered. "It is obvious that you helped this man, and we must compensate you for your time."

I glanced again at Duckie and he shrugged as if to say why not. I nodded at Michael and he left us with Samantha to handle the details.

TAPESTRY

NOTHING'S ALRIGHT
NOTHING IS FINE
PAPA ROACH — LAST RESORT

"You are welcome to remain up here this evening if you wish," Samantha offered. "Or perhaps there is something else in the house you would prefer?"

Duckie seemed as if he hadn't liked the third floor so I thought it best not to linger. "Actually, I haven't fed yet this evening. I'd like to go hunting."

"You could take care of that here if you'd like," she told me as we entered the elevator.

"Half the fun is the thrill of the chase," I told her with a secret smile. She was mortal, she couldn't possibly understand the pleasure of the hunt.

We got off on the main floor and walked toward the back of the house. The door that had been open earlier was closed now, and I could hear raised voices coming from the room. Unfortunately I could only understand a few of the words, and I couldn't identify the speakers.

"We can't allow suits to get away with this," a male proclaimed.

"Do I look like I'm going to?" a female voice demanded. "Enough! My word is law!"

When we reached an elaborately carved door marked 'employees only', Samantha laid her hand on a touch pad and looked into a retinal scanner. A light on the pad turned green and she opened the door, leading us inside. We walked down a short hallway where she punched a number into a keypad beside another ornate door and opened it.

The door led into a large office I assumed to be Tura's. It was like stepping into a pre-Civil War office. All the furnishings and decorations were from that era, except for a phonograph on a side table. A large bookcase lay against the back wall and was full of old volumes. A huge desk dominated the center of the room, and on the wall behind it stood both a Confederate and a Union flag.

There were old pistols and swords hanging on the wall, and while Samantha took out a large book to write a check for me, I noticed several framed photographs on the wall. They were all sepia toned, and I could tell that these were not the recreations you could have taken at carnivals.

The first photo was of Tura and Samantha together, wearing beautiful ball gowns. The next showed Samantha and Robert standing next to each other. He was wearing a Union uniform and she had on a lovely day dress. The last showed the three of them together in front of a large Victorian style home by the sea.

I glanced at Samantha. She didn't look to be over a hundred years old, but being ghoulled to a Kindred stopped the aging process. I knew that she had known Tura for a long time, the Brujah had ghoulled her when she had contracted some sort of disease and almost died.

"These are beautiful," Duckie told her, referring to the weapons on display.

"Yes," she replied, replacing the book and joining us. "Tura has quite a collection."

"Impressive," he agreed.

She handed me the check she'd written and I saw that the amount for a thousand dollars. "Is the amount adequate?" she asked.

"It's fine," I told her, surprised. "But you don't really have to pay me at all."

"Well, its standard procedure," she said with a smile. "You've made a friend in Michael, he doesn't impress easily."

"It was not my intention to impress," I replied. "I am only happy I could be of service."

We spoke of other things while she led us to the door and we said goodbye. Duckie and I waited for Sabrina's car to be brought around and got inside of it. As he drove away, my brother murmured something about finding a Ventrue.

I laughed softly. "Coincidentally, I need to cash this check," I told him, waiving it in the air. "The bank on Third is Ventrue owned, and open all night."

"All right," he agreed, heading in that direction.

"Wanna go shopping after the bank?" I asked. "There's a store not far from there that has a really cool pair of nunchucks for sale. I could get some stars, too."

He gave me a blank look. "Stars?"

"You know," I said, pulling a thin metal disk from a hidden pocket of my shirt. It was very small and had sharp protrusions along its edge. "A star."

He studied it for a moment as we sat at a red light. "Do you have many of those things on you?"

"A few," I replied, smiling. "I also have a few knives and—"

"Spare me," he shot back, laughing.

"A girl can't be too prepared," I reminded him with mock sternness. "You never know when a big bad man might try something."

He laughed again. "I'd like to see a guy try something with you, Caitlyn. I don't think he'd get very far."

"Even if he did I have a big brother that would take care of him," I grinned back.

"Damn right," he agreed, smiling in return.

He drove to the bank and followed me inside. I cashed the check and deposited half of it in my account, as I usually did when I got money. Duckie spotted a Ventrue ghoul who was also the bank manager and went into his office. I stood waiting in a corner of the bank, and the teller offered to see if I could join my brother. I agreed, and a few minutes later I was escorted into the office.

The manager talked to me about investing money, and since Duckie was doing so, I agreed. I had a small nest egg saved up, and decided to invest half of it, about four thousand dollars.

"Where'd you get that kind of cash?" Duckie asked me.

"Letting you buy me coffee," I replied quietly, earning a laugh.

As we were filling out our forms, the manager got a call that we were quickly able to guess was from Dimitri Centopolis, the Ventrue primogen. There seemed to be some kind of trouble brewing that involved Felicia, and while the manager insisted that he could handle it, when he hung up the phone he seemed nervous.

"Is there something wrong?" I asked softly.

"No, no," he replied quickly.

"And how is Dimitri doing these nights?" I added.

"Oh, fine," he replied easily. He took our forms and looked them over, making sure that they were completely filled out. Soon after, Duckie and I left.

In the car, Duckie suggested I call Sabrina and tell her what we'd overheard. He also handed me a small notepad opened to a page of notes. "Read her this too," he told me.

I took off my backpack and reached inside for my cellular phone. I dialed home and patiently waited for someone to answer.

"Lewis residence," Jeff said quietly.

"Jeff," I replied. "How's it going?"

"Fine," he told me. There was something strange about his voice, but I couldn't put my finger on it. "Would you like to speak with Miss Lewis?"

"Yeah," I replied, wondering why he was being so formal. I heard the sound of his footsteps, then Sabrina said my name. "Sabrina, is everything all right?" I asked.

"Yes, everything is fine," she assured me. "What are you and Howard doing?"

"Well, we were going to go shopping," I said softly.

I hesitated as I heard Jeff in the background asking someone if they'd like a drink. A deep masculine voice answered affirmatively. I was completely shocked; no one visited Sabrina's house, not ever. Salesmen didn't even come to the door.

"Sabrina," I asked, glancing at Duckie, "who is there?" He looked at me, startled. He'd told me once that in the twenty-six years he'd been with Sabrina, Jeff and I were the only visitors she'd ever had.

"It's Duncan, dear," Sabrina replied. "He just dropped in for a visit, nothing to worry about."

"Do you need us to come home?" Duncan's visit was very unusual and I was worried about her.

"No need for that, Caitlyn Rose," she replied, her voice calm and even. "You two just have your fun and be home before dawn."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm positive," she assured me. "I'll see you later."

"Okay." I hung up the phone and looked at Duckie.

"Someone's there?" he demanded incredulously.

"Duncan," I told him. "She said we didn't need to come right home, but..."

"We're going." He turned a corner and drove quickly toward our sire's house.

CONSPIRACY

DON'T LEAVE ME UP
ALARMED AND READY TO DIE
THE CARDIGANS – WAR

When we pulled up to the curb we saw Duncan's Lamborghini under the car park. We went into the house through the garage to find Jeff standing at the sink doing dishes. Jeff never did dishes.

Duckie walked over to the sink. "What's up, Jeff?" he demanded in a low tone.

"Nothing much," he replied calmly.

We could hear the low murmur of conversation from the living room, and I started to head that way, but Jeff stopped me.

"You should stay in here, Miss Lee," he warned me.

I stared at him in amazement. I didn't even realize he'd known my last name, I'd never heard him use it before.

"Perhaps you would like something to drink?" he asked without turning to look at me.

Finally I got it. Jeff was supposed to be the hired help. "Sure," I replied.

Then he did turn to shoot me a fierce look before jerking his head toward the door to the mudroom. "Of course," he said softly as he continued to do dishes.

Quietly I went and got my own bag from the small refrigerator, taking it to the bar and sitting down next to the glass Jeff had placed there for me. Carefully I poured the blood from the bag into the glass and tried not to grimace as I sipped at the cold liquid. I liked my blood hot and fresh from mortals, not cold from a bag.

Duckie walked over to the doorway of the living room, blatantly listening. As I was finishing my drink, Sabrina led Duncan into the kitchen, surprised to see us.

"What are you two doing back?" she asked.

I glanced at Duckie, but he only shrugged. "We got bored," I told her.

"Duncan, you remember my childer?" she asked. "Caitlyn Rose and Howard."

"Yes, Sabrina," he said with a smile. "I remember them." He shook Duckie's hand and then mine. I bowed to him as he stepped back and turned to my sire. "Any information you could gather on this matter would be appreciated," he told her respectfully.

"I will let you know what I find out," she replied as she walked him to the door.

"Jeff," I said, unable to resist the opportunity, "could you get me another?" I held out my empty glass and he took it, refilling it and returning it to me silently.

When he heard the front door shut, he glared at me. "Don't push it, Caitlyn," he warned gruffly.

"I was just trying to help out your act," I told him with a sweet smile.

He growled softly then snapped, "Finish the dishes," before stomping out of the room to find Sabrina.

I quickly loaded the rest of the dishes in the dishwasher and went into the living room where everyone else was arguing.

"Stop!" Sabrina ordered in a tone I'd never heard her use before. "I'll let you know in good time what he wanted." Without another word she turned and went up the stairs.

I looked at Jeff and Duckie, but they wouldn't meet my eye. I turned and followed Sabrina upstairs. I found her in her studio where she stood over a filing cabinet going through manila files. "Sabrina," I said softly.

"Yeah," she answered, her head still bent over the papers.

"What's going on?" I asked. "Is something wrong?"

She closed one file and opened another. "Go back downstairs, dear. I'll be down in a minute."

I stepped closer, trying to get a look at the papers in her hands. "Can't you tell me?"

She turned and looked at me fiercely. "Go downstairs, Caitlyn," she barked. "I'll be down in a minute."

"Okay," I whispered. Tears pricked at my eyes but I refused to let her see them. I blinked and looked away, turning for the stairs. While she had often managed to convince me to do things against my better judgement, she had never, ever used that tone of voice on me before.

When I reached the bottom of the steps Duckie took one look at my face and said, "She did that thing again, didn't she?"

I shot him a withering look and went to the kitchen where I finished my drink in silence. Rinsing my glass, I loaded it into the dishwasher before rejoining the men in the living room.

"Go up there, Jeff," Duckie was urging the werewolf. "She'll talk to you."

"I don't see you heading up there," Jeff replied as he started pacing.

Duckie and I let him have his space. After a few minutes, Duckie shot me a pointed look.

"I am not going up there," I told him fiercely.

A noise from Jeff made us both turn. He was still pacing, but it was clear that he was having trouble controlling himself. His face was contorted and it looked as if he was going to shift forms any moment. Duckie cautiously walked closer to him.

"Hey, man," he said soothingly. "We've got way too many windows, you need to chill out."

Jeff ignored him and kept pacing, anger in every movement of his body.

Sabrina came down a few minutes later and Duckie nearly ran to her side.

"You need to do something about Jeff," he said in a low voice. "He's about to need a new wardrobe from pumping iron."

Sabrina set the files she'd been carrying down on the table and glanced at Duckie and I. "Go into the family room," she ordered. As we left the room, she went to Jeff and placed a hand on his shoulder.

I walked over to the fireplace and sat down next to it on the floor, folding my legs into the lotus position. Duckie and Jeff sat on the couch while Sabrina sank into one of the armchairs and pulled out a cigarette. She sat in silence for several minutes, the long drags off her cigarette the only sign of her nervousness.

"Stay in the house for the next few days," she said at last as she ground the cigarette out in a nearby ashtray. "People have come into town that could shake things up."

"Hunters?" Duckie asked.

"No, not hunters."

"Who then?" he demanded.

"It could be a coup," she explained. "Sixty-five years ago a group of Ventrue tried to take the thrown from Felicia. The most radical among them was the primogen. Dimitri knows they're in town and he doesn't like them. Actually, he's keen on getting rid of them everyone on red alert to find out why they're here."

"Why not get rid of them?" my brother asked.

"Sheldon might have had something to do with them being in town," she said by way of explanation. "It if shit goes down, stay out of the way. I don't want you involved unless there's no other choice. I need to go speak with primogen."

"What do you plan to do?" Jeff asked softly, the calmness of his voice belied by the stubborn expression on his face.

"For now, they just want information from me," she said lightly. "There is a conclave meeting tonight, and they've asked me to come and answer a few questions for them. No, I'm not going to take any of you with me," she told Duckie as he opened his mouth to speak. "I have to leave now." When she rose to her feet, Jeff and Duckie did too. They followed her into the kitchen, but I could hear her tell Duckie to stay put as she walked out the door.

I felt very tense and afraid, something I hadn't felt in Sabrina's house since shortly after she'd embraced me ten years ago. I had been a quiet, shy child and I had not take the change very well. Sabrina had helped me, had shown me the way to be comfortable with myself and the inner beast. I had managed my fears, but there was no way to manage this one.

Without a word I went upstairs and changed into the ki I normally wore when I worked out at Sabrina's house. After tying the belt securely, I went downstairs to the basement where half of the area was set up for sparring. A large part of the remainder of the room had weight machines and punching bags.

I went to the punching 'tree' and attacked it with a vengeance, my fists and feet flying with my natural grace and ease. Duckie had followed me downstairs and sat on a mat watching me silently.

Jeff came down a little while later and spoke with Duckie for a few minutes before calling me over. I turned and bowed slightly before I could stop myself. Jeff just smiled and gestured for me to join them.

"We need to keep watch while Sabrina is gone," he said solemnly. "We don't know if there will be any trouble." He handed a pistol to me and reluctantly I took it.

"Aren't my knives good enough?" I knew I was good with knives and stars and numerous other thrown and projectile weapons, but I'd never even held a gun before.

"This works better," he told me. "You'll have better range."

I turned the gun in my hand. "Is this the safety?" I asked, flipping a switch.

Duckie moved quickly to the left and Jeff grabbed the barrel of the gun, tipping it up. He proceeded to show me how to load and fire the pistol. When he was done, I thanked him formally and went up to my room to retrieve the sword I kept there. Somehow I felt better with it hanging on my hip.

Jeff had turned on the security system and locked down the house. We turned off all the interior lights and took up separate vigils. Jeff stood at the dining room window overlooking the street, obviously in warrior mode. I looked out the patio doors in the family room where I could see the back and right sides of the yard. Duckie sat on the roof and watched the left and front yards.

About twenty minutes into our vigil, Duckie ran lightly down the stairs. I heard him whispering to Jeff before he returned to his station. A few minutes later a movement, or rather lack of movement, caught my eye. Along the back of Sabrina's property was a row of bushes that stood about four feet high. They swayed in the breeze, producing a soft rustling sound. To the right side of the back yard, part of one bush didn't move with the others. I looked closer to see a man crouched there, watching the house.

"Jeff," I hissed softly, stepping to the side of the door so I couldn't be seen from the back yard.

Very quietly Jeff walked to the other side of the patio doors. "What is it?"

"Toward the right," I told him. "Crouched in the bushes, a man."

Jeff looked closer and cursed.

"That car has gone by five times," Duckie called softly from the kitchen.

"Watch out the front window," Jeff told him. "I want to check out the rest of the main floor."

He moved off and I continued to watch the man watch the house. Just as Jeff rejoined me, the man began to move, going toward the right of the house and entering our neighbor's yard. Keeping track of him through the wrought iron fence, I realized that he had a gun.

"Jeff," I suggested quietly, "perhaps we should call 911 and report an armed intruder in our neighbor's yard."

He grinned in the dim light and walked quickly to the phone. I watched the armed man while Jeff reported him to the local police. We waited about fifteen minutes before we saw a spotlight go across our neighbor's yard. The intruder saw the light and ran toward the back of the property. I saw him briefly through breaks in the bushes, then he was gone.

The police car pulled into Sabrina's drive and I quickly hid my sword under the couch. The gun I placed in a potted plant near the patio door. I watched Jeff stash his gun in a kitchen drawer before going to answer the door. He turned off the alarm and went outside with Duckie to talk to the officers. I sat on the floor and pretended to be meditating, but I kept my eyes open in case the intruder decided to come back. After they had given their reports to the police, Jeff and Duckie came back in.

Jeff reset the alarm, then dialed Sabrina's pager and we waited in silence for her to call home. The werewolf paced from room to room like a caged animal until the phone rang and he pounced on it, barking a greeting into the receiver.

When he realized it was Sabrina, his voice softened somewhat, but he was still very anxious. Actually, by the time he hung up the phone a few minutes later he was pissed. He managed to growl out that it would be some time before Sabrina came home and that we were to stay in the house and wait.

I kept one eye on the pacing werewolf and the other on the back yard. I'd never seen Jeff like this in the three years that Sabrina had been dating him. We'd had fun earlier, all of us playing together in the pool. At the time Jeff's size hadn't scared me, as he often used that form to test my fighting skills. Now watching him move with anger so evident in his body I was frightened of him.

The rules were changing and I didn't like it. Sabrina rarely left the house and never mixed in the city's politics, yet tonight she was meeting with the primogen. No one ever came to the house, but Duncan had visited us tonight. Sabrina never raised her voice or scolded any of us,

but she'd done both tonight. Jeff had never seemed threatening before, but now his slightest glance intimidated me.

I had never been self confident except when it came to the martial arts. All other areas of my life had seemed like failures before I met Sabrina. She taught me how to trust and rely on others, how to be part of a family, this family. The only two places I'd ever been happy were on the mat or here in this house. Now the formula wasn't working and I desperately wanted my life back. I wanted things to be the way they'd been last night and the night before. Suddenly I was sure that nothing would ever be the same again. I worried and watched Jeff pace, keeping well out of his way.

Some time later, Sabrina called to let us know she was on her way home and we all watched the clock until she pulled in the drive. She took her files upstairs and when she came back down she refused to discuss where she had been or what she'd done. Disgusted, I went downstairs to work out my anger and my fear.

I started on the punching bag, then moved to the mats to work through some Tai Chi movements. When even that didn't calm me, I went back to the tree. Eventually I realized that Sabrina was watching me work out.

Taking a deep breath to calm myself, I attacked the tree with speed, grace and precision. When I was done, I turned to her and took off my gloves.

"Do you want to talk about it?" I asked her shyly. When she shook her head no, I looked away, disappointed.

"Do you think you could show me a few things?" she asked.

Stunned, I stared at her. She'd never been interested in learning defense before, although she had frequently watched me work out. "Sure," I replied. "Take off your shoes and come here." Instantly all shyness and hesitation left me. The only place I'd ever been truly at home was on the mat. Here I was in complete control.

I showed Sabrina some basic self-defense moves. We went over the vulnerable areas of the body, both human and Kindred. When she had picked that up, we moved on to some basic throws. It was nearing dawn when Sabrina called a halt to our session.

"Why don't you go on up to bed, dear," she said affectionately.

I smiled, for my Sabrina was back. I hugged her quickly and picked up my many things. Hurrying upstairs, I changed into a modest nightgown. I left my hair in its long braid and laid down to sleep.

DESCENT

BILLY GET YOUR GUNS
THERE'S TROUBLE BREWING LIKE A HURRICANE
JON BON JOVI – BILLY GET YOUR GUNS

The next evening I woke and showered quickly. After combing out my long hair, I braided it and dressed simply in a black shirt and pants. I went down the stairs slowly, not knowing what to expect.

By the time I reached the main floor, loud rock music was coming from Duckie's room. Sabrina was in the kitchen wearing loose pants, sneakers and a tank top, all black.

"Do you need anything from your house?" she asked as I entered kitchen.

When Sabrina had started dating Jeff, I'd decided I needed space of my own. I'd bought a little house nearly a mile away, and decorated it in the simple Asian style that soothed me so much. Now I spent about half my time there, but I knew I was always welcome at Sabrina's.

"No," I answered her. I had clothing here, and weapons.

"Good. I got some movies in today," she said, seeming like herself again. "Let's watch them."

"Okay." I knew from her body language that she didn't want to talk about whatever had happened the night before.

When she left the kitchen to take Jeff some coffee, I went out to the mudroom and got a package of blood. I drank it quickly, without bothering to pour it into a glass. It was bad enough I had to drink it cold, I found it bothersome to dirty a glass as well. I couldn't help but wince over the temperature. I wanted to hunt, to feel the heat of my victim, to taste life in the blood I drank. Blood bags never really satisfied my hunger.

Duckie came downstairs looking ruffled from sleep. "Where's Jeff?" he demanded without preamble.

"Sabrina is waking him now," I replied calmly. When he left the room I walked to the patio doors and looked out at the pool, remembering the fun we'd had just this time last night. I sat down on the carpet to meditate.

I'd barely had time to relax when Jeff stalked into the living room.

"I hate this shit," he growled, dropping into one of the chairs.

Before I could ask him what he meant, Sabrina walked through the room on her way to the kitchen. She was on the phone and asking someone to check something out for her.

"What's going on?" I whispered to Jeff.

He shrugged irritably.

"I'm leaving for a few minutes," Sabrina said from the kitchen doorway. She had her coat in one hand and her car keys in the other.

Jeff stood. "I'm going with you."

"No," she said firmly. "You're staying here."

"I'm going," he insisted, not meeting her eyes.

She sighed I think she knew that Jeff wouldn't be swayed. "All right. I suppose you and Duckie want to go as well?"

"As long as I don't have to wear a leash," Duckie said as he joined us.

I stood. "Do we need someone to stay at the house?" When she shook her head no, I said I'd come.

We all climbed into her BMW, which Jeff drove. As we approached our destination I recognized the house as Dimitri's, the Ventrue primogen. The gates were closed and Jeff pulled up to the call box. Sabrina leaned across the car and told the guard that Dimitri was expecting her.

The gates opened and Jeff drove in, parking near the front doors. As we got out I noticed a high number of guards around the house. I also noticed a large dog near the fence about thirty feet away. For a moment I froze; dogs were my worst phobia. An image of a large Doberman looming over my five-year-old frame flashed in my mind, it's teeth gleaming just before it tore into the child next to me. The boy had been killed and I'd been powerless to help him. I blinked to clear my mind of the memory and followed Duckie into the house.

Inside everything was black and white marble with a heavy Greek influence. We heard a scratchy female voice coming from the living room that we all recognized as Felicia's.

Lucas Graham greeted Sabrina and offered to show the rest of us into the family room while Sabrina joined Dimitri and the prince in the living room. Duckie accepted and we followed Lucas down the hall. He made small talk while we waited. I stood by a window that looked out over the back yard, my hands clasped behind my back.

Jeff was doing a good job acting the subservient bodyguard while Lucas filled us in on how our investment from the night before was doing. I stood near one of the three windows that looked over the terrace off the back of the house. The Greek statues looked like gods in the moonlight.

Soon we were joined by a tall black ghoul named Ethan Morris. Lucas made the introductions before the newcomer asked Lucas about the remaining visitors.

"Mr. Centopolis still in a meeting," Lucas told him. "Sabrina arrived a bit ago, this is her entourage."

We heard a car pull in, and Ethan announced that he had to greet them at the door. He seemed nervous about something, but tried to hide it. When the doorbell rang he went to answer it.

"Why is he's edgy?" Duckie asked softly.

"This meeting is stressful," Lucas explained.

We heard the door open and two unfamiliar male voices floated down the hall. Duckie began talking with Lucas about cars, and the older man offered to show us the vehicles in the garage. As Lucas led us through the kitchen, I caught a glimpse of the visitors. They were both tall and built like football players. The blond was dressed in a business suit that looked freshly pressed. The brunette wore a dark turtleneck under a sports jacket. Both looked Ventrue, but I didn't recognize either of them.

We went into the garage and Duckie walked over to examine the cars parked there. I followed Jeff outside and looked at a dark sedan that was parked near Sabrina's BMW. The sedan looked matched the description of the one that had driven past our house the night before.

"Are those the new arrivals?" Duckie asked, looking toward the sedan.

"They are," Lucas confirmed.

He pulled one of the cars out of the garage so Duckie could get a better look. I glanced around and saw that the dog I'd seen earlier was now near the front porch and a lot closer than it had been. I began to feel anxious, but managed to control myself.

Suddenly I called to Duckie. He walked over to me, a quizzical look on his face. "The guy by the sedan," I whispered. "He's the one that was in our back yard last night." His body shape was the same, and he had the same nervous habit of tapping his leg.

"Jeff," Duckie called.

The werewolf had walked toward the front steps, but now he rejoined us. "What?"

"Does that guy look familiar?"

"Yeah, I saw that," he replied grimly.

Just then the discussion inside the house became audible. Duckie pulled out his ever present notepad and began taking notes while I read over his shoulder.

SAB: I may have been born at night, but it wasn't last night (good one, ha ha)

MAN: Do we not have a right to visit the city we were embraced in?

FEL: Not if you are here to take over. You will rue the day that you ever stood against me.

MAN: We will see, Felicia. We will see

(Door slams)

Quickly he put the notepad away and I saw the two Ventrue storm out of the house. They, along with the man we had recognized from last night, climbed into their car and sped away. A moment later Ethan appeared in the doorway and called us inside. We went quickly and joined the others in the living room.

I saw Felicia, the prince, sitting in a chair near Sabrina. I crossed the room and bowed before her, then took the gnarled hand she extended and kissed the large signet ring she wore. A moment later I straightened I went to stand behind my sire's chair and looked expressionlessly at Dimitri. I didn't recognize the last person in the room, but from the looks of him he was Ventrue.

The living room was beautiful, and Dimitri at 6'4" dominated the room. He had the face of an older man, an experienced man, and I knew that his looks didn't lie. When he smiled I nodded in return.

Reluctantly Duckie also kissed Felicia's ring before going to stand next to Jeff, who had joined me behind Sabrina.

"He has until the end of the night to get out," Felicia announced. "If he doesn't leave, we will go from there. Leniency is not a luxury we can afford."

"Why did only three come here?" Duckie asked.

"This was a preliminary meeting," Dimitri explained. "There were originally five in the group when they were banished, but there's no telling how many are left, or what other followers they have picked up."

"We need surveillance," Sabrina put in.

"Why?" Duckie prompted.

At that moment the prince's cell phone rang. It seemed to be good news, and when she hung up she turned to Dimitri. "It appears that one of our guests are coming back stronger, they are a sizeable force." She shot a glance toward Sabrina. "They have gathered numbers over the years."

My sire seemed to be thoughtfully formulating a plan, while Dimitri simply looked angry. The Ventrue I hadn't recognized was on full alert, and now I could see the small machine gun he held at his side and slightly behind him.

"How much clan support do you have?" Duckie asked.

"We're fine on that account," Dimitri assured him, "but they may equal what we have."

"What about the defenses here and at the prince's haven?" he countered.

Dimitri was picking up the phone when we heard a loud crash from the direction of the front gates that put everyone in the room on full alert. He turned to Wayne, the man with the gun, and barked out an order to make sure everyone was armed.

"Get prince out and keep her safe," Sabrina ordered Jeff.

"Take them to the sublevel," Dimitri added, looking at Ethan, "and don't come out until I come down to get you."

Wayne opened a panel on the bookcase and began handing out guns from the artillery there. Sabrina gave me a fourteen-clip pistol and took two of the same for herself. Duckie grabbed a very large machine gun and we walked out the front doors. The moment we stepped outside a loud crash from the front gate started us running. Dimitri's guards lined the driveway and fired into the car that had crashed through the gates.

"He's human!" Duckie cried, but they continued firing.

Halfway up the drive the car crashed into a tree. I stuck close to Sabrina as she ran down the lawn and began firing at four men who were climbing over the fence. Security people were halfway down the yard, shooting at the car, and I trailed after Sabrina when she headed in their direction.

The car stopped about a third of the way up the drive, hitting a tree. Duckie sprinted to the car and managed to get the driver out and away from the vehicle before it exploded. I noted absently that he was carrying the boy toward the house but didn't really pay them much attention, I was too busy.

There were intruders everywhere, coming from both sides of the house and over the top of the fence. Sabrina and I shot at them, hitting some and missing others. There were enough defenders that not many of them got very far in their rush for the house, but the danger was there all the same.

Sabrina let out a small cry that told me she was hit just as I felt a sharp sting in my leg. I shot at one and pulled a star from a hidden pocket in my shirt to throw at another. I kept firing the gun with one hand and throwing stars with the other as I made my way to my sire's side.

I fell to Sabrina's side, blood tears streaming down my face. Calling her name, I touched her face gently. She turned her head a little, but didn't respond. I pulled back her shirt to see several very nasty gunshot wounds to her stomach. She had lost or spent a lot of blood in the firefight, and I knew she needed sustenance right away. Without thinking, I bit my wrist and pressed it to her lips. Slowly she began to drink, taking more from me than I could really afford to give, but I couldn't let anything happen to my sire. At last I pulled away and ran my tongue over the wound to close it.

Suddenly Dimitri was there and he scooped Sabrina up in his arms, ignoring her protest that she was fine. He carried her to the house and into the living room where he sat her down in a chair. He was very concerned for her, almost too much so, the way he touched and

looked at her. I realized with a start that they must have been lovers in the past. It looked like Dimitri wanted her still.

Lucas came into the room holding a large silver tray heaped with blood bags. I grabbed four of them and downed them quickly. When they were gone I was still hungry, but I knew I could control the hunger.

Dimitri only left Sabrina's side long enough to go get Felicia. While he was gone I glanced at Duckie, wondering if he'd noticed the same thing I had about our sire and the Ventrue primogen, but his face was unreadable. Jeff came back before Dimitri did and immediately to Sabrina's side and took her hand gently in his.

"Are you all right?" he asked urgently.

When she nodded and smiled I saw Dimitri come back into the room with Felicia at his side. He took in Jeff's expression, and suspicion filled his face.

I cleared my throat to get their attention. "Jeff, why don't you go start the car. I think we need to get Sabrina home." He stood reluctantly and left to follow my order. I went to Sabrina and helped her to her feet.

"Perhaps you should stay here for a while," Dimitri protested, walking to stand in front of her.

"No, really," she replied, placing her hand on his chest. "I'd like to get home and clean up. Thank you for your help. Keep me posted on the leftovers?"

He nodded. "Two of them had been here earlier," he told her, then turned to the prince. "We need to hit their lair."

She smiled and laid a hand on his shoulder. "Thank you for your diligence." She looked at Sabrina, then at me. "You should take Sabrina home and ensure her recuperation."

"I will, my prince," I promised.

Dimitri gave Sabrina a final kiss on cheek just as Jeff walked back into the room. "If you need me, don't be afraid to call," the Ventrue said as he covered her hand with his.

She leaned up and kissed his cheek as I saw Jeff return to the doorway. He stood by the door and I could see the effort it took for him not to shift in his anger.

"Is the door open?" I asked him. He didn't reply. "Go wait by the car," I said firmly, leading Sabrina toward the door.

Jeff stepped forward and swept her into his arms. As he carried her out, I turned to the prince who had just entered the room.

"It was good to see you again, my prince," I said with a bow. "Dimitri," I added to him. Duckie followed my lead and within minutes we were getting into the car.

Jeff drove away looking very angry. He had one hand on the steering wheel and another on the gearshift. Slowly Sabrina put her hand over his as he clutched at the knob. He glanced at her sharply, but when she smiled back at him he began to relax. Duckie began making kissing motions toward them, and hand motion low enough for the seat to block them. After a few minutes I had to block my giggles behind my hand.

LIAISONS

AND I'M SCRATCHING AT THE SURFACE
AND WHAT I FIND IS MINE
FIONA APPLE — A MISTAKE

Once Jeff had parked the car in the garage, we all went into the house. I paused in the mudroom for a few more blood bags, and as I walked into the kitchen I stopped abruptly. Jeff and Sabrina stood in the center of the room with their arms around each other, kissing passionately.

For a moment I watched them, then caught myself and looked away. I didn't understand the fascination sex had for the two of them. I remembered my one dismal attempt at the sexual act before my embrace. There had been no pleasure in it for me, and I had decided not to repeat the process.

When I became Kindred, I lost any desire for sex. After Sabrina began dating Jeff and he moved in with us, I decided to find out what the fuss was all about. I had tried one of the men at Everlasting Moments, the experience had failed to impress me. I had enjoyed watching the play of muscles on the man as he moved above me, but I had failed to find any satisfaction in the act although the feeding had been wonderful.

More recently I had been dating the drummer in Duckie's band, Larry Hasler. We had been going out for several months, and our relationship did include sex. I felt some affection for him, he had a beautiful body and strong blood. I liked the way that light shone on his bare skin as he preened for me.

Larry fancied himself in love with me and wanted to deepen our relationship, but I felt that wouldn't be fair for him. After all, its not like I could get married and have babies. He didn't even know what I was.

While the sex was okay, the blood I drank was more interesting than the actual intercourse. I'd begun to think I needed to find my own werewolf and give that kind of sex a try. Maybe it was the wildness of the Garou that turned Sabrina on. However, given the antagonism most werewolves felt for vampires, I believed that I'd never get the chance to try my theory.

Eventually Jeff pulled away from Sabrina and took her hand. They walked toward the bedroom, but were interrupted by Duckie, who was on the phone.

"Sabrina, can we leave now?"

She barely glanced at him or paused in her step. "Sure," she said. "Where are you going?"

"To practice," he told her.

"Are you taking Caitlyn?"

He glanced at me and I nodded, grateful for the chance to get out of the house. "Yeah," he replied.

"See ya before dawn," she called over her shoulder as they walked into the bedroom.

He put the phone back to his ear. "I'll be there in forty five minutes."

I ran upstairs to shower quickly. Dressing simply, I was back downstairs in fifteen minutes, wrapping the rubber band around the bottom of my braid as I walked into the kitchen.

"You ready?" Duckie asked.

"Yeah," I said. "Let's take my car."

We walked past Duckie's 84 Chevrolet to my 91 Aura. As he put his guitar in the trunk, I wondered, not for the first time, what he did with the money he made performing. I knew he made decent money because when I joined him I did too. He just seemed to go through his cash quickly with nothing to show for it.

I drove to the warehouse where the bass player of the band lived and we normally practiced. Brad Manson was the only other Kindred in the group, tall, dark, strong, and very Brujah. From what I gathered, he and Duckie used to be in the same band when they were mortal.

Stopping long enough to get his guitar from the trunk, Duckie led the way inside. We were the last ones there, and everyone cried out a greeting to us. The rhythm guitarist, Dale Parker, was average height and blond. He had dark brown eyes, but there was something about him that I didn't like. I avoided him whenever I could.

Julie Larson played keyboard for the band, and she tried very hard to be friends with me, sometimes too hard. I liked her for the most part, but I wasn't sure I wanted the type of 'friendship' that she wanted from me.

When I walked over to Larry at his drums, he kissed my cheek. I smiled up at him, admiring his long dark hair and green eyes for a moment before taking my usual stool nearby.

After plugging in his guitar, Duckie launched into a resounding guitar solo. He was an excellent guitarist, always impressing me when he played. But it was his singing that I liked most about my brother. He had a versatile voice and the ability to cover many octaves. He could also mimic almost any performer out there. I'd seen him hear a new song once and play it back exactly, then sing the lyrics and sound just like the singer.

Twenty minutes into the rehearsal Duckie asked me to sing something, one of my favorites. It was slow and haunting, the words telling how a woman felt for her man. I sang it softly, conscious of Larry's eyes on me the whole time. When the song was over, he jumped to his feet.

"I think we need to take a break," he declared, looking pointedly at me. "I'm gonna go to the store next door for some beer, wanna come?"

I smiled and nodded.

"Five minutes," Duckie said sternly. "And let me use your phone, Caitlyn."

Larry frowned at the time restriction, but I just smiled and handed Duckie my phone before taking my lover's hand. "Anybody else want anything?" I asked. Julie wanted a soda, but no one else replied. "We'll be back in a little while," I added, ignoring the impatient look I got from my brother.

Once we were outside, Larry caught me up in his arms. He kissed me passionately, and I ran my hands across his shoulders, enjoying the heat and texture of his linen covered body.

"Let's go into the alley," he whispered against my lips.

I pulled back a little and watched the pulse beat in his neck. Distinctly I remembered the taste of his blood, the fire and sweetness of it running across my tongue. After nights of cold drinks, the thought of something warm lit the fires of hunger inside of me. While Larry didn't know Duckie and I were vampires, sometimes I fed from him during sex. The pleasure running through his veins made the blood taste that much better.

"I don't know, Larry," I murmured. "Five minutes isn't nearly enough time."

"Tease," he chastised softly, lifting me easily by the waist and kissing me again.

I wrapped my arms around his neck and returned the kiss. I loved the heat his body generated and the strength of his hands. In a moment he put me down and led me into the alley to the old couch someone had left there a few weeks ago. It smelled musty and threw up dust every time we sat on it, but neither of us minded.

He kissed me again as he ran his hands under my shirt. Years of hard work at his day job, and nights of handling drumsticks had roughened his hands and I loved the feel of them against soft my skin. He tasted of whiskey and cigarettes and his breath was warm against my cheek.

I ran my nails roughly down his back, not drawing blood only because he still wore his shirt. He moaned at my antics and eased me down on the couch. He had to turn his head to cough at the dust that rose, but fastened my lips on the side of his neck and sucked. Without using my teeth I didn't draw blood, but I wanted to save that pleasure for later.

His body felt warmer now than when we'd begun, and I rubbed my body against him wanting that heat inside of me. The muscles of his back and stomach contracted as he thrust his lower body against mine, and I laughed low in my throat.

"Tell me you want me," he whispered as his hands moved down my body.

"I want you," I murmured obligingly against his skin. "More than you know." I could feel my fangs emerging from their hiding spot, and dragged the tips across the pulse in his neck.

"Yes," he urged as he eased my pants downward. "Do it now, bite me."

I often bit him when we had sex, but as he never saw a wound afterward, he assumed it wasn't blood I was after. "Not yet," I told him, reaching for the buckle on his belt.

He moaned in anticipation and moved back a little to strip the clothing from the lower halves of our bodies. He was ready for me, stiff and proud in his passion. I ran a finger down the underside of his penis and it jumped at my touch. He lowered himself on me and I moved beneath him, meeting his passion with a practiced motion.

"Now," he demanded.

My teeth punctured his flesh even as he slid inside of me. I tasted the passion in his blood and it nearly drove me wild. The warmth and heat of his essence flowed through me while his body filled mine, warming it from the inside. He moaned in my ear and his hands tightened on my hips.

A part of me wished I could feel the same passion he did, but I felt only hunger for his blood. The sexual arousal coursing through him affected me when I drank his blood, but I knew it was a pale shadow of the sensations flowing through his body.

I couldn't help but wonder if this was what Sabrina felt when she and Jeff made love, an echo of her lover's needs. I knew it was risky for her to feed from him as werewolf blood brought the beast nearer to the surface, so I doubted that she had even that to stimulate her. With effort I drove all thoughts of my sire out of my mind and concentrated on my lover.

As we made love, drank his blood slowly and matched the movements of his hips. He was a bit rough, and if I had been mortal I might have been bruised by his ardor. I stroked his back and buttocks, encouraging him on, waiting for his release.

Finally it came, and he drove into me roughly, breaking the rhythm we'd established. I filled my mouth one last time with his blood before licking the wound closed and moaning in feigned passion, clutching at him as I pretended my own release.

He held me for a long moment, stroking the skin of my hip. I felt warm for the first time in many nights even though the desert air had taken on a definite chill. The weight of his body felt wonderful on top of me, and I brushed my cheek affectionately against his shoulder.

When we finally returned to the warehouse, Duckie ignored us but immediately began playing his guitar. Julie gave Larry a harsh look, and turned her puppy dog eyes on me. I knew she was jealous of my lover, but I simply wasn't interested in women.

We practiced for several hours. I sang backup on many of the songs the band covered, as well as several duets with Duckie. There were a half dozen or so songs I could sing on my own, but I couldn't compete with my brother's range.

MASKS

DON'T FOOL YOURSELF
YOU CAN'T STOP IT IF YOU TRY
ENRIQUE IGLESIAS – SHE BE THE ONE

Around four o'clock we started packing up the equipment for the next night's gig. My phone rang, and since Duckie still had it, he answered it. A moment later something in his face frightened me. He hung up the phone and tossed it to me.

"Let's go," he barked, leaving the rest of the equipment for the others to pack into Larry's van.

"Who was it?" I demanded, running to catch up to him.

"We have to go now," he said firmly, taking hold of my arm and heading for my car.

"Hey, Howard," the bass player called. "Where ya goin'?"

"Family business, man," he called over his shoulder.

My hands shook as I pulled out my keys and when I dropped them, Duckie picked them up. "I'll drive," he said flatly.

"What's going on?" I asked as we headed for home.

"Sabrina wants us home now," he told me. "She sounded upset."

After the events of the last few nights, I knew whatever it was couldn't be good. "Drive faster," I advised him, gripping the seat nervously.

He did, making it home in record time. He parked the car in the breezeway and we both dashed up the front steps. Once inside we stopped quickly at the sight of our luggage piled near the door.

"Good," Sabrina said from the dining room table. "You were quick."

"What's going on?" Duckie demanded. I was speechless.

"You're going on a trip," she announced softly.

"Why?"

She stood and walked over to us. "I'm being investigated," she admitted. "I don't want you involved."

"We're not leaving," he stated firmly.

I walked to the suitcases and opened mine up. I noted that many items inside had been retrieved from my own house, including the suitcases themselves. I closed them back up and turned to look at Sabrina.

"Where's Jeff?" I asked softly.

"Packing."

"Is he going with us?"

"We're not going!" Duckie exclaimed.

"Yes, you are, Duckie," she said patiently. "Jeff is leaving too, but not with you."

"I'll be close by," the werewolf said from the doorway of the living room.

"We can't just leave you," my brother insisted.

"Yes, you can. I'll be in touch and as soon as this is all over, you'll come home." She turned away, but not before I saw tears glistening in her eyes. "Duckie, come here a minute," she said, going into the kitchen.

"Jeff, what's going on?" I asked urgently when they'd left the room.

"She's afraid they'll find out about me and punish all of us," he said, pain evident in his voice.

"Would they?"

"Yes," he replied softly, "they—"

"No way," Duckie said loudly from the kitchen.

"It's what I want you to do," came Sabrina's stern reply.

"No!"

I walked to the doorway to see them arguing by the sink. "What's going on?"

"I won't drink it," Duckie said firmly, backing away from the glass Sabrina was holding out to him.

"Yes, you will," she insisted.

"Will someone please tell me what's going on?" I asked impatiently.

"Sabrina wants me to drink that," he told me, pointing to the glass which looked like it held blood. He was staring at it like it was alive and about to bite him.

"So drink it," I replied.

"No way," he repeated. "I'm not doing the bond thing. You drink it."

His comment told me the blood was Sabrina's. Drinking Kindred blood causes a blood bond to be formed. The more ingested, the stronger the bond. Three drinks was all it took to completely bond anyone, mortal or Kindred.

"I've both been there and done that," I reminded him with a smile. Sabrina had bound me to her right after my embrace to help me fit into the family better. It had worked very well, helping me get over my natural reticence and tendency for solitude.

"I won't go there," he told her harshly.

She sighed and opened a nearby cupboard. Taking out a plastic container, she poured the blood inside, then placed it in a cooler with a dozen or so blood bags. "if you change your mind its in here," she told him. "I'd like you to drink it. If it weren't important, I wouldn't ask you to drink."

"I'm sorry," he said softly, not looking at her.

I went to her and hugged her tightly. She kissed my cheek and turned away. I returned to the lobby and picked up my bags. Jeff had several items in his hand and together we carried them outside. A few minutes later Duckie came out carrying the cooler and the remaining bag.

Jeff loaded everything into the trunk of my car beside Duckie's guitar before turning to us and handed a thick envelope to Duckie. "There's money and credit cards in there," he told us. "Don't worry about running out, Sabrina will send you more if you need it. There's directions on the envelope for you to follow once you get to the airport."

"Will you be keeping an eye on her?" Duckie asked, unnaturally subdued.

He nodded. "Closer than she thinks."

I stood beside the car, tears filling my eyes. For a moment Duckie put his arm around me, helping me to pull myself back together. I stepped forward to hug Jeff. "Take care of her," I whispered into his ear.

When he nodded again, I turned and got into the passenger's side of the car. A few moments later Duckie climbed into the driver's seat. Silently he started the car and pulled out

of the drive. I glanced back to see Sabrina in the dining room window, crying as we drove away. We were both quiet on the way to the airport.

I couldn't help feeling like my life was falling apart. The four of us were the closest family I'd ever had. True, my adoptive parents had tried to form a family with me, but their Japanese heritage had conflicted with my Vietnamese background. I'd never been close to them, preferring to engross myself in Tai Kwan Do and my studies at the dojo.

Sabrina had been the first person to pull me out of myself when she included me in her family. For that fact alone I adored her. Now that family was gone.

As we drove to the airport, Duckie called Brad to let him know we'd be gone a while. He gave him a few names for someone to stand in as lead singer and guitarist while we were gone, but wouldn't explain what was going on. When he hung up, he was quiet, thoughtful.

He pulled into a private hanger area when we reached the airport. A small jet sat inside, and two men stood by the steps leading inside. When Duckie parked the car, one of them approached us.

"Welcome," the man said to my brother as we got out of the car. "I'm Captain Stewart, and you must be Howard. This is Caitlyn Rose?"

"Yes," he replied.

"Let's get your luggage on board," the captain said, gesturing toward the trunk of the car.

We lifted our things out and the copilot came over to join us. After the introductions, we all carried the luggage inside the plane.

"Mr. Centopolis has asked me to give you a few items," the pilot told us. He handed Duckie and I brand new cellular phones. "These are the latest issue, and Mr. Centopolis asks that you each carry them at all times.

Duckie and I took the phones, which had caller identification, speed dial, and a two-way radio function. The pilot also gave us a fairly expensive camera.

"Do you have a destination in mind?" he asked.

I remembered seeing a billboard on the way into the airport. "New Orleans?" I asked Duckie.

He jerked as if I'd slapped him. "New Orleans?"

"You know," I prompted. "Mardi Gras, people everywhere, party town?"

"New Orleans," he repeated dazedly.

I wondered what was wrong with him, but I let it drop and turned to the pilot. "New Orleans."

He nodded. "Give me half an hour to file our flight plan, and we'll be on our way." Nodding, he followed the co-pilot into the cockpit.

Duckie used the phone he'd been given to call Sabrina. They argued for a while about the blood she'd given him, but in the end he drank it. He told her where we were going and she asked him to take a lot of pictures for her.

I wandered through the plane that I was fairly certain was Dimitri's. The galley was stocked with blood bags, and there were two cabins in the back that had no windows. As it was nearing dawn, I readied myself for bed, missing Sabrina horribly. I wanted to be in my own bed that night, not on an airplane that was even now taking off for an unfamiliar city. I bit back my tears and closed my eyes. I hoped that the prince would complete her investigation of my sire soon so we could go home.

NEW GROUND

ON THIS HOT SUMMER NIGHT
BETWEEN FIGHT AND FLIGHT
JEWEL — STANDING STILL

The next evening I woke to the sound of an airplane taking off. I rolled onto my back and tried to remember where I was. Then I remembered; we were in New Orleans. I got up and found the light switch with relative ease. Going out into the main cabin I found the pilot and co-pilot waiting for me.

"Good evening, miss," the captain said pleasantly. "Did you sleep well?"

"Yes," I said simply.

"If you are hungry, there are supplies in the galley," he told me. "Also, we thought that you and Mr. Duke would like to change before going into town, so your luggage is here if you need it. We have also made arrangements for you to meet the prince, and we have taken the liberty of reserving a hotel suite for you. We will be staying on the floor beneath you."

Given the fact that Mardi Gras was in full swing, that was a minor miracle. "Thank you," I replied. Going into the galley I grabbed several blood bags from the refrigerator. I dreaded drinking the cold blood, but I hadn't quite filled up from the struggles of the night before. The co-pilot carried the one suitcase I needed into the bedroom for me and I asked him to wake Duckie up.

Since we would be meeting the prince, I dressed a bit more formally than usual. The loose slacks I pulled from the suitcase were delicately made of black silk. The matching shirt was embroidered with a large red dragon that began at my right side and wrapped around my torso, its tail entwining my right arm. I inserted matching earrings in the holes of my earlobes and placed a similar ring on the middle finger of my right hand.

While I wasn't expecting trouble, I wanted to be prepared, so I added knives in sleeve sheathes to my usual stock of weapons. I placed my nunchucks in my backpack along with a long sharp knife. I took a few minutes to brush out and re-braid my hair before going into the main cabin carrying my suitcase. The co-pilot took it from me and took it out to the waiting limo.

"Hi," Duckie said from the doorway of his room. He seemed tired to me, even depressed. I could hardly blame him as I felt the same myself. He was dressed in dark slacks and a ruffled shirt under a black vest.

"Hi," I replied. "Are you ready to meet the prince?"

He nodded and we went out to the car. As we approached, the co-pilot asked how long we intended to remain in town. When I told him I wasn't sure, he asked that we give him a few hours notice before we wanted to leave so he could file a flight plan and gave me his number.

In the limousine that was waiting outside we found a file folder with information on New Orleans. We looked over its contents as we made our way toward the Garden District. It was slow going as the streets were filled with people.

One woman in particular caught my attention. She was colored and tall, with long straight hair and a sequined dress. Her silver shoes matched the headdress she was wearing. Gorgeous black men surrounded her, most of them shirtless. She was Kindred, but I had no way to tell her clan.

As we passed a large Victorian home on First Street, the driver pointed out that it was the home of the Treador Primogen, Anne Rice. While I was still digesting the fact that the famous author was Kindred, he turned into one of the many driveways that lined the street.

This was another beautiful old Victorian home, and Jared drove the limo around to the back of the house where he parked near the four car garage. He opened the door for us to get out, then led the way to a large oak door on the back of the house.

We walked down a flight of stairs and through another door to a small sitting room with an intercom on one wall. The room was decorated in the old southern style one would have expected from an Anne Rice novel.

A tall black man dressed casually in khakis and a black long sleeve shirt introduced himself to us as Mandigo. He nodded at Jared before telling us the prince was waiting and leading us into the conclave room.

A long carved table dominated the room, surrounded with heavy chairs, five of which were filled with Kindred. We looked at the head of the table where a beautiful black woman sat looking both proud and aristocratic.

She wore a large head wrap and a long flowing gown that flattered her womanly figure. Gold hoop earrings swung from her ears, and she sat back in the chair regally like the queen she was.

Marie LaVoe was a free woman in the late seventeen hundred. In her mortal life she'd led a Voodoo cult the likes of which the world had never seen. Even now it was rumored that she had more power than the pope. She watched us silently as Mandigo introduced us.

Thomas Thorne sat at the prince's right hand and was good looking, with wild dark hair and sunglasses. He wore a tuxedo and managed to look both dignified and fun in it. On his left hand he wore a signet ring that bore the Tremere clan symbol.

Anne Rice sat to the prince's right holding long stemmed red rose. Her black hair was peppered with gray, and intelligence shone in her dark eyes. Next to her sat Adam Bearpaw, a tall Indian with long dark hair who was probably Gangrel. He was beautiful, wearing jeans, cowboy boots and a Harley Davison tee shirt with a wolf pendant hanging prominently from his neck.

To the left of Thomas sat Jaz Wentworth, a wiry Ventrue with brown hair and a white linen suit complete with bow tie. He seemed haughty and full of himself, holding his cane and sitting as far away from everyone else as possible.

When the introductions were complete, the prince called us to come forward. "Caitlyn Rose," she said in a voice that somehow managed to be commanding and yet soft at the same time.

"Yes, ma'am," I replied courteously.

"How long are you staying in town?"

"For Mardi Gras," I told her.

She nodded. "My rules are much the same as Felicia's. Follow them and we will have no problems." She went on to explain that there were a few unwelcomed Brujah in the city that would be dealt with in the next few days, but we weren't to worry ourselves about the problem. She also told us that Anne had prepared for our arrival and had offered to show us around town. Taking her words for the dismissal they were, Anne rose and led us from the room.

Anne proved to be an excellent hostess for our first visit to New Orleans. She told us of many attractions around town as she led us up the stairs, and when we walked out into the night two of her children were waiting for us. Ivy was a short blonde with a tendency to be quiet that Emma more than made up for. The second woman was much taller, with auburn hair that hung nearly to her waist.

We all got into the limo and Anne directed Jared to take us on a quick tour of the city. We skirted the edge of the pedestrian packed streets of the Mardi Gras, eyeing the topless and naked people who thronged to the city. Many people were drinking alcohol, and all seemed to be having the time of their lives.

Eventually we made our way to our hotel, and Anne and her daughters came inside with us. The lobby was busy, as was to be expected for the holiday. On our way to our suite, Anne entertained us with a brief history of New Orleans.

Once Duckie and I had changed, we all went back to the limo where we spent several more hours touring the city. Jared drove us through the Garden District and the French quarter, then past tourist attractions like Marie's House Of Voodoo, the Aquarium of the Americas, Tulame university, St. Charles Avenue and Bourbon Street, as well as several of the famous cemeteries that were throughout the city.

Eventually we stopped at a Voodoo house that sold everything from jewelry to Voodoo dolls. Anne new Penelope, the owner, and Ivy suggested I have my cards read. Penelope was keen on the idea, and led me toward a beaded curtain where she called out to Morgan that she had a customer. Duckie might have followed me, but Penelope insisted that all readings were personal.

I parted the beads and walked into a small darkened room. An old woman sat on the floor near a low table, and she gestured for me to kneel on a pillow. Feeling very uncomfortable, I did so.

"I am Morgan," she told me, "and you have a question."

"Yes, I do," I admitted softly. I wanted to know if our family would ever be the same again.

I don't remember everything the woman told me that night. Somehow she knew that I was a champion, that I followed a discipline that pertained to my ancestry. She knew that I was very fast and that I'd won many tournaments.

"About ten years ago something in your life changed," she said softly. "I see red, a field of red flowering bushes." Thoughtfully she picked up a crystal from the table and looked into it. "Roses," she announced. "You have strong family ties, I see a mother figure."

"Yes," I whispered, stunned at her accuracy.

"She wants you to experience the world," the reader told me as she gazed into the crystal. "She wishes only good things for you. I see a journey of many leagues. There is much love and danger in your future, my dear. Take heed, I see that it is a time of great turmoil at home, but this will pass."

I blinked away tears, wanting more than anything to believe that she really could see the future. Just when I thought she was done, she looked up at me.

"I see a man," she said softly. "A beautiful man who will bring you new experiences. He is a strong man with animalistic qualities, and your relationship will not be an easy one at first, but things will prevail in the end. That is all I can see."

I put a hundred dollar bill in the brandy snifter that sat on the table. "Thank you for setting my mind at ease," I told her honestly. I felt much better than I had since we'd left Vegas, more at peace with myself. With a final thank you, I walked back into the main part of the store.

Duckie and Anne were near the door talking with the tall black woman I'd noticed on the street earlier. Anne seemed to know the woman, and as I approached she told her that our party would go to the High Stakes with her.

"It's a nightclub," she explained when I joined them. She introduced the woman as Silver, and this close I could see that the woman was really a man wearing drag, a fact that Anne later confirmed.

With the addition of Silver, our group numbered six. We decided to walk to High Stakes as it wasn't far. We could actually see the marquee of the converted theatre from blocks away, and the line of people at the door might have been intimidating if Anne hadn't known the bouncers. Within moments we were on our way inside.

MAN OF THE PEOPLE

AND YOU'RE CONSUMING ME VIOLENTLY
AND YOUR REVERENCE SHAMELESSLY TEMPTING ME
NO DOUBT – NEW

The foyer was large and open, with bathrooms to the left and right and a concession stand straight a head. Flanking the concession stand were double doors that led into the club proper. The locals we were with seemed to know everyone, and soon we were led through the doors into the club.

The tables were set up on levels that led down to a dance floor placed strategically in front of the movie screen. Videos flashed on that screen and the music had a pounding tempo that was hard not to follow.

We found a table near the center of the room, and Duckie caught the eye of a flower girl in the crowd. He bought everyone a rose, and danced with Ivy and Silver. While he was busy, Anne and I talked over the sound of the crowd.

"If you are interested in performing, we can arrange it," she told me. "Most nights the manager puts out a call for entertainers to perform. It's very popular."

"I would like that," I said honestly. Anything to keep my mind off of what may be happening at home.

When Duckie returned, he was more than willing to get on stage. When he was told that the club had a room full of instruments he nearly went wild with enthusiasm. Anne went off to talk to the manager, and a few minutes later a call went out through the club for musicians.

I followed Duckie to the stage where a staff member was waiting to show us into the instrument room. We were joined by several others, and in short order we'd decided who would play what instrument.

Duckie took lead guitar, of course, and would sing lead along with myself. A tall brunette with calm eyes named Kate would play bass. Kenny, a short Hispanic boy barely out of his teens, would play rhythm guitar. When I looked at the man who would play drums I had to stop myself from gaping.

Simon was very tall, several inches over six feet. He had dark wavy hair that fell over his forehead and made me want to smooth it back. His eyes were the sky blue I remembered from my mortal years, and his smile when he shook my hand would have robbed me of breath if I still had the need for it. I smiled shyly at him in return and asked Duckie what we should perform.

We decided to do eight songs in all, the equivalent of a set. After a bit of discussion we agreed on the songs, two of which I would sing lead vocals on. The others I knew well enough to sing back up for Duckie.

While we were waiting for the DJ to announce us, Duckie caught my eye. He glanced at Simon and mouthed the word 'werewolf', but I'd come to that conclusion on my own. Knowing that the drummer was a werewolf didn't scare me away, if anything it made me even more interested in him.

The DJ finally announced us and we walked out onto the stage together. Duckie used every ounce of his performance-ship and soon had the audience eating from his hand. While I sang back up I stood near the side of the stage at a microphone stand. I found it hard not to keep my eyes off of Simon, and noticed that he was watching me too. One of the two songs I

sang was a duet with Duckie, a love song about lovers torn apart by fate. At one point during the song I glanced back at Simon and his eyes seemed to burn through me.

When we had completed the set, all of the performers helped to return the instruments to the back room. I bent to lift a heavy amplifier, and Simon was instantly at my side to take it from me.

"Let me get that for you," he said over the noise of the crowd, his voice deep and masculine. His muscles rippled beneath the tight shirt he wore and for a moment I was fascinated with the movement. I smiled and thanked him, only half tempted to tell him I was probably every bit as strong as he was.

Duckie and I walked back to Anne's table where she congratulated us on the performance. A moment later I looked up to see Simon smiling down at me.

"Would you care to dance?" he asked.

"Yes," I told him honestly. "I'd love to." I stood and bowed slightly to Anne before taking the werewolf's hand and letting him lead me through the crowd to the dance floor.

He turned and put his hands on my waist. I looked up at him and smiled. The top of my head barely reached his collarbone, making me feel small and fragile next to his size and obvious strength. He moved gracefully around the dance floor, and I enjoyed the play of muscles beneath my hand.

"How long are you visiting New Orleans?" he asked.

"We just arrived tonight," I told him. "We'll probably stay for Mardi Gras. And you?"

"I came in for Mardi Gras too," he replied. "I'm staying at a friend's house. He's out of town for a few weeks and needed someone to watch his house."

"Where are you from?"

"Oklahoma City."

"I'm from Las Vegas," I told him. "Are you in a band in OKC?"

"Yes. We usually have regular gigs, but when we don't I'm a bouncer in a club downtown."

I looked at the breadth of his shoulders and the strength in his arms. Power radiated from him and I liked it.

"Are you still in school?"

I smiled. "Actually, I'm a little older than I look," I admitted softly. "I sing with Howard's band."

"Do you mind if I ask how old you are?"

"Old enough to drink legally," I told him vaguely.

We continued to make light conversation while we moved together to the slow beat of the ballad that was playing. When the music stopped, he walked me back to the table.

"I was hoping you would meet me for lunch tomorrow," he said as he held my chair for me to sit down.

Lunch was not even a remote possibility. Every morning when the sun came up I, like most Kindred, fell into a state that passed for sleep. In the last eleven years I had never awakened before sundown.

"Actually my brother and I have plans tomorrow." He looked a bit downcast and I thought perhaps he believed I was blowing him off. "I could meet you for dinner."

He brightened. "Great, I can pick you up at—"

"Seven," I interrupted. "At my hotel." I gave him the name and location, and he agreed with a grin.

"See you tomorrow then."

"I'll look forward to it," I smiled back at him. I watched as he walked away with the fluid grace of an animal.

"Hot date?" Duckie asked.

"I guess so," I murmured, still watching Simon walk away.

We sat and talked to Anne and her childer for a while. They knew of many Mardi Gras events that seemed interesting, and we made plans to attend some of them.

At one point a man approached Duckie and tapped him on the shoulder. "Hey, don't I know you?"

Duckie looked at the man and for a moment recognition flashed in his eye. "No, I don't think so," he denied.

"Yeah, man," the stranger insisted. "I knew you in 'Frisco back in sixty-five. You were playing with a band I saw there. You haven't changed a bit!"

"You have me mistaken, sir," he said easily. "You probably knew my father."

"No, man, I swear it was you," the man insisted. "Hey, will you give me an autograph? I love the way you play."

Duckie glanced at me briefly before taking the napkin the man was holding out. Quickly he scribbled his name and handed it back.

"Wow, thanks, man," the guy said enthusiastically before walking away.

Anne looked at Duckie with a small smile on her face. "Did you really know him?"

"Yes," he admitted. "Before."

She nodded thoughtfully. Soon after she suggested going back to her house to play cards.

REUNION

FAR ABOVE THIS DIRTY WORLD
FAR ABOVE EVERYTHING
NATALIE MERCHANT – SEVEN YEARS

As we left the club, Duckie asked if she could take him by an address that he gave her from memory. She agreed, and when we drove past the house he asked if we could stop for a few minutes. He got out of the car and stood looking at the house for a long time. There were a few lights on downstairs, and I could see the flicker of a television in one of the windows.

Slowly Duckie walked up to the door and knocked. I got out of the limo and stood beside it, very curious. Duckie hadn't said anything about knowing someone in New Orleans.

"Do you know who lives here?" Anne asked me.

"No," I replied as the door opened.

A woman in her late twenties stood in the open door and looked at Duckie. Even from the street I could see the surprise on her face just before she threw her arms around him. Duckie hugged her back and made no effort to move away.

I heard the girl laugh as she pulled back and looked up at him again. I couldn't hear her words, but she sounded pleased to see him. When she glanced over his shoulder at the limo, I waived to her. She said something to Duckie and he turned. When he motioned for us to join them we all did so. The woman led the five of us into the living room and invited us to sit down.

While it was a nice house in a good neighborhood, the furnishings were slightly worn. Everything was spotless and well cared for, but it was obvious that money was a problem for this family. A large family portrait hung on the wall. The woman was smiling in the picture holding a young boy of about seven on her lap. A man stood behind them with a hand on her shoulder. I was startled to realize that the boy reminded me of Duckie.

"Pamela," Duckie began softly, "this is my sister, Caitlyn Rose."

"Sister?" She seemed shocked and looked at me curiously. "I didn't know you had a sister."

"Actually, I'm adopted," I told her with a friendly smile.

Duckie introduced Anne and the others next. Pamela was very excited, and told Anne that enjoyed reading her novels.

After a few pleasantries, Pamela turned to Duckie. "What are you doing in New Orleans?"

"Can't a guy drop in to see your new house?" he asked innocently, behaving more like himself than he had all night.

"Duckie, we've lived here for two years," she protested.

He shot a quick glance at Anne and whispered, "Ix nay on the uckie day."

I smiled.

"We've missed you," Pamela told him fondly. "You used to visit us a lot and now we never see you."

"You were a lot closer in Phoenix," he told her.

Phoenix. Duckie used to visit there often, until about two years ago. He'd never said why he went there or why he stopped, but for years he'd go there several times a month for days at a time.

"Is Daniel up?" he asked hopefully.

"Duckie, it's one o'clock in the morning," she chastised him. "He's sleeping."

"Are you sure?" he prodded. "Can you check?"

"I know you miss him, but I can't wake him at this time of night," she said reasonably. "Why don't you come by tomorrow when he's awake? I know he'll love to see his 'Unca Duckie'."

"You could come after we get back from the University," I suggested, trying to cover for his unavailability when the sun was up. "I've got that date and you don't have anything planned."

"Yes, I could," he agreed. "If that's okay with you?" When she nodded, he grinned.

There seemed to be a great affection between them and I wondered if she were his daughter. I also wondered who she thought he was.

"Duckie," Anne said softly. "It's late and the girls need their beauty sleep."

"Yes," he replied reluctantly. He stood and went over to Pamela, who hugged him.

"I've missed you," she said softly.

"How is Daniel doing?" he asked quietly.

"The new school is good for him," she assured him. "We really appreciate you sending the money, it helps so much with the tuition."

Her statement solved the puzzle of what Duckie did with all his money and explained why he was always broke.

We said our good-byes and went out to the limo. As we pulled away, Anne asked about the school Daniel was going to.

"Daniel is mildly autistic," he said softly. "There's a really good school for autistic children here."

"And you help them pay for it." It wasn't a question.

"Yes, they wouldn't be able to send him there if I didn't."

"Because she's your daughter," Anne continued.

"Yes," he admitted. "She thinks I'm the son of a man who was in her father's band. She has no idea."

I grinned at him until he asked me why I was smiling. I leaned forward and whispered, "Duckie's a daddy."

Anne and the girls laughed good-naturedly, and after a moment so did Duckie. We went to Anne's house where we played cards and she kept us entertained with stories of how she thought of characters for her novels until an hour before dawn.

FORCE OF NATURE

I THOUGHT LOVE WAS ONLY TRUE IN FAIRY TALES
MEANT FOR SOMEONE ELSE BUT NOT FOR ME
THE MONKEES — I'M A BELIEVER

When we got back to our hotel suite I went through my luggage trying to find the right thing to wear to dinner the next night. Everything from jeans to an evening gown was in the suitcase, including some things I'd never worn. There were also several pairs of shoes, even sneakers I didn't remember owning. Sabrina had also included a small make up kit still in the box, and barrettes for my hair, although I rarely wore it out of its single braid.

I smiled over the array of martial arts weapons that Sabrina had packed for me. My favorite pair of nunchucks were there, along with a short sword that could be concealed down my back. Extra knives and stars were hidden in the shoes. Sabrina had indeed thought of everything.

At last I laid a jade shirt and black slacks on the bed. The shirt was brocade with small Japanese animals running through the pattern on the cloth. The pants were plain and cotton, loose enough not to restrict my movements but clingy enough to reveal my curves. I fell asleep anticipating my evening with Simon.

When I woke the next evening, I showered quickly and spent a few minutes blowing my long hair dry. I found a silver barrette with a gold dragon on it and used it to fasten the front of my hair back before dressing quickly in the clothes I'd picked out the night before.

Taking out the makeup kit that Sabrina had sent I carefully put on a minimum amount of eye shadow, then used mascara to lengthen my lashes. I placed a pair of silver studs in my ears and pinned a small gold dragon on my shirt.

I examined myself critically in the mirror. It felt like a lifetime since I had taken so much care with my appearance and the results were pleasing. I went into the sitting room to get Duckie's opinion but for a long moment he said nothing, just studied me from head to toe.

"Do I look okay?" I asked nervously.

"Yeah, fine," he assured me.

"Should I go back and braid my hair?"

"No, you look fine," he repeated. "Different, but fine."

At that moment there was a knock on the door. Anxious, I looked at Duckie and hissed at him to open the door.

He put his hands on his chest. "Me?"

"Yes," I barked softly.

He limped to the door in a poor imitation of Renfield from every bad Dracula movie ever made. I rolled my eyes as he straightened just before opening the door.

"Good evening," he drawled, drawing the last word out.

"Good evening," Simon's deep voice replied. "Is Caitlyn Rose here?"

Duckie stepped aside. "Yeah, come right in."

Simon walked in and my eyes devoured him. He wore a tight black tee shirt and snug fitting black jeans. His hair was clean and shiny in the lamplight, and his eyes searched the room for me. When he saw me he smiled and walked over. He carried a bud vase in his hand that held a single lotus blossom surrounded by fern leaves.

"Someone's been doing his homework," Duckie murmured.

I shot him a dark look as Simon handed me the vase.

"I had a really hard time finding this," he admitted. "Every florist in town is out of flowers, but I finally found one that had some left."

"That's very sweet of you," I replied softly, smiling up at him. "Thank you."

He looked me over carefully, his intense gaze making me somewhat uneasy. "Are those comfortable shoes?" he asked, gesturing toward the black sneakers on my feet.

"Yes," I told him.

"Good," he said with a smile. "I thought we'd walk."

"That's fine, as long as we're back before morning," I replied with a grin. "I turn into a pumpkin at dawn."

He looked away. "Yeah, I figured."

I raised my eyebrows and looked questioningly at him, but he didn't elaborate.

"Are you ready?"

Mentally I ran down the list of weapons I was carrying. I had a wrist sheath on my left arm that held a lethally sharp blade. There was an ankle sheath on my right leg that held a small but effective throwing knife. In my purse was my favorite pair of nunchucks and several stars. I also had stars in the five concealed pockets of my clothing. If Simon had any ideas about hunting vampires tonight, he'd be in for a surprise.

"Yes, I'm ready," I said aloud.

He gestured toward the door and I led the way to it. He opened it for me, and I turned to wave at Duckie before walking out. As we moved toward the elevators, he laid his hand in the small of my back. I glanced up at him and admired the slight stubble on his chin.

"So," he said as we got into the elevator, "how are you enjoying your time in New Orleans?"

"I like it," I admitted. "Mardi Gras is very exciting."

"Have you seen any of the parades?"

"No, we got in late last night and spent most of the evening with Mrs. Rice."

"It's pretty amazing that you know her," he commented softly as we walked through the lobby. "Is she a friend of yours?"

"No," I told him. "She's more of a friend of a friend."

We walked through the party that was Mardi Gras making what small talk we could in the tumultuous crowd. People lined the street and sometimes it was difficult to get through. It was early yet, so most people were still somewhat sober, but others were obviously drunk.

We reached a large mall and Simon opened one of the glass doors for me. He led me past a Rainforest Café to a storefront with a large sign that read 'Gameworks'. He approached a desk in the entry area and asked how long the wait would be for a table. When he was told forty-five minutes, he purchased what appeared to be two small credit cards and handed me one. He took the pager the matre'd offered and led me through a doorway into an arcade.

The room was quite large, and there was a wide selection of games to choose from. Many were the kind you interacted with by sitting on the seat and moving the bike or the skis or what have you. We walked through the arcade once to get a feel for what was there before Simon chose to play a motorcycle racing game. I stood behind Simon to watch.

He leaned low to the handles and his tee shirt stretched tight across his skin. His muscles bunched and lengthened as he played the game, and I felt a hunger rise within me, a different type of hunger than I'd ever felt before.

I wanted the blood within him true enough, but I also wanted to touch every inch of his body. I wanted to smell his skin, taste it everywhere. I wanted to feel the play of his muscles as he moved, to experience his strength.

When he lost the game by hitting a wall, I jumped slightly. By the time he dismounted and turned to face me I had control of my thoughts again.

"Is there a game you'd like to play?" he asked.

I grinned, grateful for the nights that Duckie had spent playing video games with me. "Tekken 3," I declared.

Tekken 3 was a virtual reality game. The players stood inside a circle on the floor and kicked or punched to make their on-screen equivalent do the same. It was a two-player game, and Simon chose to play a large male warrior. I chose a small female to fight him.

"I'll try not to be too hard on you," he promised with a smile.

I grinned back at him. "I, of course, will show you no such mercy."

He laughed and the fight began.

We spent a few minutes circling each other before he moved forward to strike. I dodged and struck out. His character doubled over and flew back. He got up and came after me again. This time he caught me. We traded blows for a while, but I won the first round, hitting him three out of five times. Simon looked my way suspiciously while we waited for the next round, but I just shrugged. We continued to play, and I took all three rounds, winning the game.

"Let's try again," he suggested.

Again he lost.

He looked bewildered as we stepped off the mat. I put my hand on his shoulder and smiled.

"Don't feel bad," I told him. "I'm a third level black belt."

"You're just full of surprises, aren't you?" he asked.

At his recommendation I played the motorcycle game, but I wasn't very good at it. We played a few other games, avoiding the fighting ones, and by the time our table was ready we were thoroughly enjoying each other's company.

We went into the restaurant area and were seated in a booth along the wall. The waitress handed me a menu and I stared at it with uncomprehending eyes. For the first time the difficulty of appearing human occurred to me. In Vegas I'd been careful to never go on 'dates' with guys. This was the first time I'd actually sat down at a restaurant in eleven years.

Simon's voice interrupted my dark thoughts. "Do you know what you want?"

"Hmm? Oh, I guess a steak, rare," I replied.

"Do you want something to drink?"

"A soda."

When the waitress returned, he ordered for us. We discussed the merits of various video games while we waited for our food. When it finally came, I toyed with mine, trying to talk enough to cover my lack of appetite. He finished his beer and his steak quickly and excused himself to find the men's room.

Quickly I glanced around, looking for some where I could dump some of my dinner. The people in the booth behind me had just left, so I was able to deposit half of my food on their plates. I also switched drinking glasses to make it appear that I had finished my soda. I was sitting quietly by the time Simon returned.

"How was your steak?" he asked, looking at my plate.

"Very good," I lied.

"You didn't eat much of it," he murmured.

"Actually, I had a late lunch," I told him.

"How late?"

I shrugged, tense over his questions. "I don't know, I didn't pay attention. Why?"

"No reason," he said, watching me intently.

I couldn't hold his gaze, I felt guilty for lying to him.

"So," he drawled, lifting his glass for a drink. "How long have you been a vampire?"

EMERGENCE

AND IF YOU COULD ONLY SEE
I SWEAR I'D SHOW YOU TRUE
KID ROCK – WHAT I LEARNED OUT ON THE ROAD

I wasn't sure I'd heard Simon's question correctly, and my startled eyes flew to his face. "Excuse me?"

"How long have you been a vampire," he repeated, setting his glass down carefully on the table. There was absolute certainty in his eyes and I knew I couldn't lie to him again.

"Eleven years," I admitted softly. "How long have you known you were a werewolf?"

He sat back in his seat, a sad look on his face. "Since I found out my wife was pregnant."

I was a bit stunned by the news. "You're married?" I asked in a small voice.

"I was."

"You were," I repeated.

His eyes dropped to the table. "My wife and son were murdered three years ago."

"I'm so sorry," I told him, noting the dejection in his body language.

"We lived in New York," he told me. "They never found the killer, but I will. And when I do they will pay."

Silently I prayed the killers weren't Kindred. "You have no idea who it was?" I asked aloud.

"If I did, they'd be dead," he declared in a cold voice.

I nodded to show I understood, but there were no words I could give him to ease his pain.

"I'm sorry, it's just been very difficult for me," he admitted, his voice full of sorrow. He leaned forward and clasped his hands on the table.

Placing my hands over his, I whispered that I understood.

He opened his hands to hold mine. "What do you think about all this, Caitlyn Rose?" he asked softly.

"All this?"

"About seeing a werewolf," he explained.

"Well," I said hesitantly, "there could be problems involved with this type of relationship."

"Problems?"

"You know," I prompted, "usually our species don't get along too well."

He smiled slightly. "At least there would be no disagreements between us on that."

"I'm glad you're sure about that," I muttered.

"You're not?" He sounded surprised. "I've never been involved in that type of hunting, have you?"

"No," I said quickly, "but it's clear that you could overcome any resistance I would be able to offer." He was both bigger and stronger than me. All the martial arts training in the world wouldn't stop him from tearing me apart if that was what he wanted to do.

"Caitlyn, you have to know that I would never hurt you," he vowed. "I am a man of my word."

I studied his face for a long moment, reading the need for honor in his eyes. "I believe you."

He looked down at our hands and said quietly, "You know, I wouldn't have asked you out if I hadn't smelled Garou on you."

I was sure that Jeff had packed or helped pack my things and his scent must have lingered on my clothes. "He's a good friend."

"Oh?"

I knew what he was thinking, but he was wrong. "He's dating a close relative."

He looked confused. "Relative? You still see your family?"

I smiled. "Not really. He's dating my sire."

"Sire?"

"Let's just say that Sabrina made me the woman I am tonight."

"Oh..." We sat in silence for several minutes just holding hands. "Well, what would you like to do now?" he asked finally.

"We could go play Tekken 3 and I could whip your butt again," I suggested softly.

He laughed and the sound resonated through my entire body. "I don't think I'm man enough for that."

I raised an eyebrow. "You look man enough to me."

"Maybe we should just take it outside," he suggested facetiously. "Then we'd see who was the man."

I laughed softly. "I don't think so. If you're anything like Jeff, I'd lose over and over and over."

"Jeff?"

"The werewolf you smelled on me," I explained.

"Is Howard also a product of your sire?"

I nodded. "He still lives with her and I stay at the house half the time," I explained. "We're very close, like siblings."

His face grew solemn. "Sounds like you have quite a family going there."

"We do."

He was quiet, and there were shadows in his eyes as he remembered his lost family.

"You know," I said softly, "from my own experience in losing a family, it's usually best to find another one."

"That's what the pack said when I left New York," he murmured.

"You're not part of a pack now?" Garou usually ran in packs with two to ten members. Packs are family units unto themselves.

He shook his head. "There is a pack that I hang out with now and then, but I don't really belong."

Feelings I had forgotten about stirred within me. I liked Simon, really liked him. He was sweet and kind and gentle. Perhaps...

"Maybe you could come to Vegas and meet the rest of my family," I suggested. "I don't know that much about werewolves, but from what I understand we are kind of like a pack."

Interest shown in his eyes. "I'd like that."

"Why don't we blow this joint," I told him. "Let's go for a walk through the party—I mean the streets."

He smiled and released my hands to put some money on the table. When he stood and held out his hand to me, I took it. We left the mall and began making our way through the crowd. At times the crush was so bad that Simon let go of my hand and put his arm around me to keep me close to him. He was very protective, sheltering me against the worst of the press.

I smelled blood all around me and it made me feel alive. Simon's blood smelled the most potent, and for a moment watched the pulse in his throat. I hungered for his blood, even as I knew I wouldn't take it from him. His hand on my waist felt warm on my cool skin.

"So tell me about yourself, Caitlyn Rose," he said, talking loudly to be heard over the crowd.

I looked up at him and told him the story I'd only told two other people in my life; Sabrina and Duckie. "I was born in Viet Nam in 1972. My father was an American GI and my mother was a village girl he fell in love with. He died before I was born and she died at my birth."

"I'm sorry," he told me softly.

I shrugged. "It's hard to miss what you can't remember. I lived for eight years in a French orphanage near Ho Chi Men City. We weren't allowed to speak Korean, so I know French quite well. When I was five a local monk stopped several boys from harassing me and decided I needed to learn how to defend myself." I smiled at the memory. "I was very small for my age."

He grinned down at me. "You still are."

I ignored his comment and continued. "I was adopted by a Japanese couple living in San Francisco when I was nine. I didn't fit in real well, but they loved me. I kept up my martial arts training and started competing. I didn't always win, but it was close. When I was thirteen, I went to work in a dojo to help pay for my studies."

"How did you meet Sabrina?"

"She saw a competition I was in on television. Howard came to my hotel and invited me to meet a woman he said wanted to paint me. I was intrigued, so I agreed."

"And she made you what you are," he growled, his voice cold and angry.

"It wasn't like that, Simon," I protested, stopping and staring up at him. "We talked all night about everything, the three of us. I grew up never having a real family. I'd never been that close to anyone, never knew anyone as well as I knew those two by the time the sun came up. Sabrina didn't even mention vampires that first night. She invited me to sleep at her house and I did. I woke up about an hour before sundown and cried because I knew I'd have to go back to San Francisco. I was already homesick for a house I'd spent less than twenty-four hours in. I wanted to be a member of that family so badly.

"I went out onto the lawn and began my daily work out. When it was dark, the outside lights came on and a few minutes later I saw Sabrina watching me from the doorway. I heard music playing and looked up to see Howard strumming his guitar on the roof.

"Sabrina walked over to me and told me that I could be a part of her family if I wanted to, but it would mean changing what I was forever. She led me into the house and told me about the Kindred and the Toreador, her clan. She told me I would have to drink blood and avoid the sun, but that I would be young and strong forever.

"But the most important thing was that I would be part of this wonderful family, that I would finally be accepted and loved, and no one would chastise me for being too Korean, or too American, or too good at fighting. I would belong.

"I accepted her offer, and she embraced me right there, in her family room, with the sounds of Howard's guitar washing over us, and I have been a part of her family ever since."

Simon was silent for a few minutes as we walked, then he said, "I can understand why you accepted."

"It was the easiest choice I ever made," I told him honestly.

"When did Jeff come into the picture?"

"About three years ago, Sabrina began spending a lot of time away from us. Eventually she brought him home to meet us. They had a bit of trouble adjusting at first, and so did Howard, but I saw how much she loved him and I knew it would work out."

"True love never fails, is that it?" he asked, looking down into my eyes intently.

"That's right."

Simon pulled me around until I stood before him and he put his hands on my waist. I raised my hands to his shoulders and tugged at him, hoping for a kiss. He lifted me until my face was level with his.

"My, what strong arms you have, grandpa," I laughed.

"All the better to hold you with, my dear," he growled with mock menace as he tried to hide a smile.

"My, what big teeth you have, grandpa," I added.

He laughed outright. "I think you'd better check your own before pointing a finger at me."

I laughed too, but had to stop when he kissed me. He held me closely and I put my arms around his neck. He tasted of meat and beer and man. The kiss was like nothing I had ever known and I was enthralled by the beauty of it. When he pulled away I made a small sound of protest deep in my throat.

"Is that noise you?" he asked, his voice husky.

Dimly I realized I heard my cell phone ringing. "Mm hmm," I breathed as the ringing stopped.

When it started again, he put me on my feet. "You should probably get that," he suggested softly.

BIG GOODBYE, THE

WHEN IT'S THIS GOOD
THERE'S NO SAYING NO
CHAKA KHAN — THROUGH THE FIRE

I swung my backpack off and reached in for the phone, fumbling a bit as I hit the button to answer before putting the receiver to my ear. "Yeah?"

"Caitlyn?"

"Howard?" I wasn't really paying attention as Simon was tucking my hair behind my ear.

"We have to leave," my brother announced.

"What?" I demanded. "I'm busy, can't we talk about this later?"

"No," he said sternly. "I just talked to Sabrina and she wants us out of New Orleans. She says the town is full of Brujah and we have to leave tonight."

I stiffened and pulled back a little from Simon. "What are you talking about? We just got here."

"She wants us gone," he repeated.

"But—"

"Sabrina's orders," he said sternly. "And she wants you do dump the wolf."

He hung up before I could reply and wouldn't answer his phone when I called him back. In desperation, I called Sabrina in Las Vegas.

"Duckie called me and I don't understand what's going on," I told her.

"Caitlyn Rose," she said sadly, sounding more depressed than I'd ever heard her. "I'm sorry, but you must do as I say and leave New Orleans. With the Brujah in town it's too dangerous for you there."

"All right," I conceded, "but what about—"

"Duckie said that you found someone there," she interrupted, "but you must understand that you can't continue the relationship."

"Why?" If Sabrina had a werewolf lover, why couldn't I?

"It will only end badly," she told me. "I want more for you than to have you end up like I'm going to end up."

My blood froze. "How are you going to end up, Sabrina?" I asked softly.

She was silent for a long moment, then she sighed. "My judge is here," she explained softly. "This may be the last time we can talk."

"Sabrina, no," I whispered. "We'll come—"

"Stay away from Las Vegas," she ordered. "What's done is done, and you can't change it. Remember that I love you."

A dull click signaled the end of our conversation, and I hung up the phone slowly.

"What's going on, Caitlyn?" Simon demanded. "Is everything all right?"

"No," I said softly, my head spinning from the implications of Sabrina's words. "Look, I have to go, leave New Orleans tonight." As I spoke I dialed Jeff's number, but he didn't answer. "We have to go home," I told him.

"To Vegas?" he asked as he laid a comforting hand on my shoulder.

"Yes," I replied. "I have to get back to the hotel."

"Would you like me to come with you?" he offered.

I thought about it while we walked toward the hotel and wished I could say yes but I knew it was impossible. Everyone seemed pissed enough that she was dating a werewolf, they'd absolutely flip if I brought one home too.

"It's probably not a good idea," I told him finally. "Things are pretty tense and I don't know what we'll be walking into there."

"I understand," he replied, "but if you need me, call me. I'll come, regardless."

I took a moment to gather strength from his arms before leading him quickly to the hotel.

When we got to the suite Ivy and Emma had already helped Duckie pack our things. The girls were a little edgy about having Simon around, but not enough for me to send him away. Duckie agreed that we had to return home as soon as possible, and the girls decided to take us to the airport in their car.

I sat in the back between Duckie and Simon with the werewolf holding my hand beneath his jacket. His thoughtfulness made me think more of him, if that were possible. I hoped that we would have a chance to explore our feelings for each other, but given the situation, I couldn't be sure we would. If the prince decided that Sabrina had to die for her association with Jeff, I was pretty sure she'd have to kill the whole family.

Although we'd hurried to get to the airport, once there we had a twenty minute wait before we could take off. Duckie had called ahead with our destination, and the pilot had contacted Vegas. When he told us the prince had requested our presence immediately upon landing, I began to get apprehensive about our arrival home.

With twenty minutes to kill, I took Simon into the cabin I'd slept in on the way to New Orleans. We sat on the bed holding hands in silence for a few minutes, each of us lost in our own thoughts.

"I'm sorry I have to leave so soon," I said at last.

"It's okay," he assured me. "I just hope that everything turns out okay."

"I do to," I admitted.

"I know you can take care of yourself," he added with a worried smile.

"I can," I told him, "and Howard and I will take care of Sabrina. I don't know what I'd do if anything happened to her."

He nodded but looked away remembering, I was sure, the death of his own family. "I'm not sure where we go from here," he said softly.

"I'm sorry," I repeated. "Hopefully this will be resolved soon. Maybe I could visit you in Oklahoma City."

"OKC and Vegas aren't that far apart," he murmured, playing with a loose strand of hair that lay against my neck. "So you can visit me, if that's what you want."

I smiled. "That would be great."

"I wish you didn't have to go," he said softly.

"Me too," I replied.

He leaned forward and gently kissed my cheek. Before he could pull away I turned my head and our lips met. The electricity that shot through my body was unbelievable. Finally I understood why Sabrina and Jeff were kissing all the time. If they felt anything like I felt now, I was surprised they ever stopped.

In fact, I'm not sure we would have stopped kissing each other if someone hadn't tapped at the door of the room and announced that it was time to go. With a final kiss, Simon and I joined the others in the main cabin. Duckie and I said our goodbyes to Emma and Ivy, who expressed their hopes to see us again.

Under their watchful eye, I could only shake Simon's hand in farewell. He leaned forward and kissed me gently on the forehead, and it was all I could do to let him walk out the door. I wanted so badly to tell him I needed him, to beg him to come home with us, but I knew I couldn't.

Through a window I watched him refuse a ride from the girls and turn to walk toward the city. I tried to memorize every movement he made, knowing that I might never see him again.

OUTCAST, THE

LOVE WILL BE OUR FORTRESS
WHEN ALL ELSE COMES UNDONE
JEWEL – I WON'T WALK AWAY

Ethan was waiting for us at the airport in Vegas with a limo ready to take us to Cesar's Palace. "Your presence is requested at the conclave," he told us.

Duckie frowned. "Is there a problem?"

"I don't know," he replied. "I just have orders to take you there."

Too quickly for me he was parking at the doors to the casino and opening the doors for us to get out. He led us to the desk where he picked up an access card for the elevator. Moments later we were standing in the antechamber of the conclave room, a place I hadn't been since I'd been presented to the prince eleven years ago.

Tori, a Ventrue I'd met before, was waiting before the double doors with Agripina who was a Nosferatu that worked closely with the prince. Neither of them seemed pleased to be there, in fact Tori seemed downright sad.

"Caitlyn Rose and Howard are here to see the conclave," Ethan announced formally.

Agripina nodded and held out her hand for the access card that he'd gotten upstairs. He gave it to her and, with a final nod in our direction, got back on the elevator leaving us behind.

"The conclave is waiting for you, Agripina said compassionately.

While it was nice to know that both she and Tori were on our side, unfortunately they weren't the ones that mattered. The prince and primogen of the city would decide Sabrina's fate, and we had to do everything we could to help her.

Tori opened the doors for us and led us into the long conclave room. A large table sat in the center surrounded by seats for each primogen down the sides and a large chair on the end for Felicia, the prince. There were no empty chairs at the table, although Sabrina sat to one side where three chairs had been placed against the wall.

She was wearing a white linen pantsuit and leaning forward in her chair. Her aura told me she was both fearful and aggressive, and I wondered what had put her in such a state. I hoped the conclave hadn't made any decisions before we had arrived. I looked around at the others in the room to see if I could tell how things were going.

Felicia seemed compassionate to the situation, but I knew that no matter what her feelings about the situation were, she would decide what she felt was best for her city. Idella, the Tremere Primogen, sat to her left. While I didn't know her well, it seemed to me that she would be open to hearing our side of the story.

The owner of Everlasting Moments had an icy calm about her and I wasn't sure whose side she would be on. I knew that Duncan would side with Sabrina, and I hoped that Dimitri would as well.

"My prince, the witnesses are here," Agripina announced

Sabrina looked back at us with an encouraging smile as the door closed behind us.

Felicia studied us for a long moment before clearing her throat. "Do you know why you have been brought here before me?" she asked formidably.

"No, my prince," Duckie and I replied.

She looked at Sabrina. "The accused is to rise and join her childer."

Without a word our sire stood and adjusted her clothing. Silently she turned and moved to stand between us and the table with her hands clasped in front of her.

The prince turned to Duckie and I. "You childer don't know who she's been living with? You have no idea what he is?"

"Jeff?" Duckie asked innocently. "He's a nice guy."

"If I may have a word with them, my prince," Sabrina suggested softly.

"This is preposterous," Sheldon hissed.

"Sheldon," Felicia snapped. "Behave, or leave."

The Nosferatu leaned back in his chair and sulked, but he was silent.

Sabrina turned to us with a very serious look on her face. "It is very important that we tell the truth here, do you understand?"

We glanced at each other and nodded reluctantly, not really having a choice.

"Do you know what type of being this Jeff is?" the prince demanded. When we nodded, she asked us to detail the lifestyle we shared.

"Outgoing?" Duckie asked. "I don't understand."

"We live as a family in peace," I said softly.

"How much knowledge does he have of us?" she queried.

"We don't really talk about it with him," Duckie answered honestly.

"Does he attempt to influence the decisions of your sire?"

"No," he replied, struggling not to laugh.

"She has her own mind," I explained. "No one tells her what to do."

My brother shrugged. "In time I've known him everything's been cool."

"In the last three years, how much contact has she had with other Kindred," the prince questioned.

"She never leaves the house," I told her, "and the only visitor we have had was Duncan, and that was a few nights ago."

Felicia sat back in her chair and watched us thoughtfully. Just when I was ready to scream from the silence, Dimitri spoke up.

"I believe that will be all. The two of you may wait outside now."

"What will happen?" Duckie asked, a thin veneer of politeness over his tensely spoken words.

"That will be all," he repeated firmly.

"Sabrina?" I whispered.

She made no move to show that she'd heard me. I reached out and touched her shoulder, trying to comfort her as much as I could. Slowly she turned and kissed first my cheek then Duckie's.

"May I say something?" Duckie asked the prince. When she nodded, he pulled a picture from his pocket and handed it to Duncan, who passed it down to Felicia. "This boy has autism. He is different from other children, an outcast because of bigotry and hatred. I don't know if he will ever be able to live in harmony with others, but I know that if people can accept him for what he is, that bigotry can be overcome."

He stood tall, my brother, speaking words he hoped would save our sire's life. "Racism is slowly dying in the mortal society. If more of us can put aside our differences, we will be able to live in peace."

The picture made its way back down the other side of the table, and Duckie took it from Tura before continuing. "There are times that we have to hide who we are from mortals in the fear that we would be destroyed, but werewolves have as much to fear from hunters as we do. Because of their reclusive lives, the relationship that Sabrina and Jeff share do not risk any of us."

"Thank you, Howard, for your advice," Felicia said softly.

I followed Duckie over to kiss her hand and on our way to the door we kissed Sabrina's cheek. Walking into the hall was one of the hardest things I'd done, but I knew she had to face the judgement alone. We'd done all we could do.

Once the doors closed behind us I slumped against the wall next to them. I didn't know what we would do if they decided to destroy our sire. We'd been a family for so long that to even think of living without it was impossible.

I looked at my brother and saw that he had tears in his eyes. I went to him and hugged him, and we took solace in the fact that we still had each other. After a moment we sat down in the two chairs that had been placed near the door, holding hands.

As the time passed, Duckie grew more and more restless. Finally he took to pacing the room from one end to the other. I was restless as well, and no matter how hard I tried I couldn't seem to clear my head enough to meditate.

I tried calling Jeff again, but it was no good. I worried about him while we waited, hoping that no member of Kindred society had taken matters into their own hands and tried to kill him.

Time stretched out until every minute seemed like an eternity. I strained to hear what was going on in the conclave room, but not even a whisper of sound escaped the closed doors. I hoped they would make their decision soon before either Duckie or I went insane from the suspense.

Finally after what seemed like forever but had in reality only been half an hour, the doors opened. Dimitri stood in the opening and called for us to return to the conclave room. Grateful for an end to the wait, we followed him inside.

Sabrina was standing in the same place we'd left her. Duckie and I moved to stand on either side of her, and we took her hands in ours. I tried to read something of what had happened in her face, but she wasn't giving anything away.

For a long moment, only silence filled the room. I felt the eyes of each member of the conclave move from one of us to the next as if weighing what our reaction would be to the news we were about to receive. Finally the prince spoke.

"In light of the testimony it is the will of the conclave that the accused's life is not forfeit," she said softly. "The accused and her childer will be under surveillance to verify that there is no risk to the Masquerade. As Sabrina already leads a life of solitude, no influence or interaction issue restricted. This issue will be known only to the conclave. Sabrina is mandated to continue her life in secrecy with her mate, and her childer allowed to continue to keep the relationship secret."

It was only when Sabrina slumped in relief that I realized how tensely she'd been standing. I squeezed her hand and looked at the primogen to see their reactions to the news. Sheldon

seemed pissed, and Tura seemed uneasy about the proclamation, but the others were obviously happy for us.

Felicia turned to Dimitri. "You are charged with accompanying them to residence you and your clan responsible for keeping this secret," she announced. "If it is revealed it is your clan and these three held responsible. That is all, you are dismissed."

I bowed low at the waist before walking over to kiss the prince's hand. "You are a wise prince, sire," I said softly. "Thank you for allowing our family to remain together."

When I took her hand she pulled me closer and placed a rough kiss on my cheek. "You are welcome, my dear."

HOME SOIL

A HAPPY END

STRONG AND KIND

MELISSA ETHERIDGE — I WANT TO BE IN LOVE

When we left the conclave room, the chairs that Duckie and I had waited in were gone. Dimitri acknowledged Tori with a smile, which she returned as we headed for the elevator. He led us through the lobby to the waiting limousine that was parked outside.

While not many words were spoken in the car, the air was one of celebration. There was only one thing missing.

"Where's Jeff?" Duckie asked Sabrina.

"Don't worry," she replied softly, although I could see in her eyes that she was worried herself.

While Duckie and I carried our luggage into the house, Sabrina stayed behind to talk to Dimitri. Through the open door I watched them embrace briefly before he got back into the limo and drove away.

Sabrina joined us and took off her jacket, looking more relaxed than I'd seen her in days. She was quiet as she walked into the kitchen, and Duckie followed her to make sure she was all right. We found her in tears, but they were happy ones. We hugged each other, thankful for the return of the family that meant so much to all of us.

"Thank you for your help," she told us. To Duckie, she added, "Your words were beautiful. I can never thank you enough."

He shrugged as if it didn't matter, but we all knew it did. "We're family," he said simply.

She smiled and wiped her tears. "I'm going to change," she announced.

"How about a round in the Jacuzzi?" he suggested.

"Give me fifteen minutes," she agreed.

By the time Sabrina and I had changed into our bathing suits, Duckie was waiting for us downstairs. The phone rang as we joined him and I prayed it was Jeff, but when Duckie hung up without giving the phone to Sabrina I knew it couldn't have been him.

"Who was that?" Sabrina asked hopefully.

"Just some dude selling knives," he replied dismissively.

I could tell she was disappointed, but she simply gestured toward the pool. We talked for a while about the Kindred who'd tried to take over the city and Sabrina told us that they had mostly been taken care of. There were a few stragglers, but no one with enough power to be a threat to Felicia's reign.

It was nice for the three of us to be together talking in the hot tub, almost like old times. The only thing missing was Jeff, but none of us brought up his name.

We told our sire about our experiences in New Orleans, although I tried to keep Simon from the stories we told. Of course Duckie couldn't let it rest.

"You can call Simon now," he told me a little too enthusiastically.

I didn't reply, just looked down to hide the longing I knew was in my eyes. While I didn't know Simon that well, I did care for him, and I missed him.

"Caitlyn Rose Lee," Sabrina said sternly.

"Yes," I whispered, preparing for a lecture on how I had to stop thinking about the werewolf.

I felt her move closer to me in the water, and she put her arm around my shoulders. "Just be careful," she told me.

I looked up at her in surprise. "You mean it?"

She smiled. "Yeah."

"Oh, Sabrina, I know you would like him," I exclaimed. "He's tall and dark and he's in a band in OKC. His wife and child were murdered in New York, and he's so sad when he talks about them, but when he looks at me—"

"By the way," Duckie interrupted dryly, "you got company. The knife salesman's here."

Suddenly a large object hit the water, both surprising and drenching all of us. When the figure came out of the water, Sabrina threw her arms around his neck. Jeff held her tight against him and they whispered words of love for a moment before he turned to Duckie and I.

We ended up in a huddle in the center of the Jacuzzi, holding on to each other for dear life. Everyone spoke at once making it impossible to understand any one voice, but that was all right. At last our family was complete.