



ELIZA: CHILD OF DARKNESS

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PROLOGUE

MOTHER, TELL YOUR CHILDREN NOT TO WALK MY WAY
TELL YOUR CHILDREN NOT TO HEAR MY WORDS
WHAT THEY MEAN, WHAT THEY SAY
MOTHER - DAZING

I'm not the kind of person you say hi to in the store and get to know as a casual friend. I've never lived a casual day in my life and I sure as hell don't have many friends. Normal people look the other way when they see me coming down the street. I've been told that there's something about me that puts most people off, makes them uneasy. I'm not surprised.

Maybe it's the way I watch my surroundings, like I expect trouble from everything and everyone. I do. Maybe it's because I move like I could win a fight with anyone that tried to take me on. I might. Maybe it's the anger that burns inside of me, waiting like a beast crouched in the darkness for a chance to spring to life. It does, sometimes when I least expect it to. Or maybe it's the haunted look in my eyes, the knowledge that I once had a chance for a much different life, a better life, but I lost it at the whim of... something, fate maybe.

But you know, I'm just a regular girl. I have wants and needs just like everyone else. The only difference between you and me is that you probably still believe in the American Dream, while I live in reality.

If you're squeamish about reality, you probably shouldn't read any further. If you don't believe in the things that go bump in the night, you'll most likely think this is a passable work of fiction and go on believing that your world is the true reality. If that's the case, stay in your own warm and fuzzy world, and don't waste your time reading on.

My life hasn't been an easy one, but I've dealt with the things that have made me what I am and I live the best way I can. I don't want you to pity me for the story I'm about to tell you; I certainly don't pity myself. I've made mistakes and I pay for them just like everyone else. I won't make excuses for that. All I ask is that you try and understand my side of the story, the dark side.

GROWING UP DHAMPYR

HOW'D YOU DARE TO TELL ME
THAT I'M MY FATHER'S SON?
WELL THAT WAS JUST AN ACCIDENT OF BIRTH
WIND UP - JETHRO TULL

We lived in a lot of places while I was growing up, each one dirtier and colder than the last. The woman who called herself my mother was Linda Gentry. She wasn't really my mother, but everyone believed she was. Kate Hepburn was really my mother, but everyone thought she was just a friend of the family. Some family.

My first memory is of Kate. A storm had moved over Boston from the ocean and I was afraid of the thunder. She came into my room and pulled me out from under the bed. She sat down on the floor and held me safe in her arms until the storm was over. It was a rare kindness, Linda certainly wouldn't have bothered to comfort me.

Boston was where Linda convinced me that 'good' girls weren't smarter than boys. She was content for me to suck in school as long as I looked good and was polite. Of course I wanted to please the woman I was told was my mother, so I gave up the visits to the library that I had loved so much and started hanging out with boys instead. By the time I stopped trying to please her, books were the last things I was interested in.

Kate didn't live with us, but she came around a lot. She'd breeze in some time after sundown on nights when we least expected her with gifts and smiles for both Linda and me. She would tell me stories for hours, then put me to bed and spend the rest of the night in Linda's room. Sometimes I could hear them talking, but I never could make out what they said.

Linda had a terrible temper and during Kate's many disappearances she was a bitch to live with. I had to hide in my room, or in the basement to get away from her quick fists. When Kate came back, she would be fine again. Kate never seemed to notice the bruises or the scratches; I guess Linda told her even then that I was getting into fights, long before I really was.

The only thing Linda ever cared about was Kate. She was addicted to her the way some people are addicted to heroin. When Kate was around, Linda was the perfect mother figure, but when Kate was gone, she was dangerous. Kate made Linda tolerable, or rather, Kate's blood did.

We lived in Providence, Rhode Island the night my life changed. I was barely nine when I came home from a friend's to find Kate's car parked in the driveway. I was very excited and didn't even think to knock on the door of Linda's room before I opened it. What I saw shocked me and I froze like a deer in the headlights.

Kate and Linda were sitting very close together on the bed. At first I thought they were just hugging, then Kate looked up at me. There was blood on her lips, and large fangs in her mouth. Linda was holding on to Kate's arm, sucking on it as if she would die if she let go. Kate hissed and the woman who was supposed to be my mother looked up. She didn't have any fangs, but there was such a look of ecstasy on her face that I was more afraid of her than of Kate.

I wanted to scream, but I couldn't make a sound. I slammed the door and ran out of the house. Down the street was an overgrown park, and I hid in some bushes that were along the back fence trying to understand what I'd seen.

For the first time I realized that I'd never seen Kate in the sunlight. She never ate with us, she was very pale and her skin was always cold. Even to my child's mind it was obvious that she was a vampire. I stayed there for a long time, almost in shock, holding myself and rocking in the darkness.

Around midnight Kate appeared in front of me. I screamed, but she pulled me out of the bushes and carried me back to the house. I fought her, but she was so much stronger. By the time she laid me in my bed I was worn out from fighting. She told me to go to sleep and forget what I'd seen as if she expected me to do it, but I couldn't. I just kept thinking about what I'd seen, how the woman I knew in my heart was my mother was also a blood sucking fiend.

It's almost funny to look back on the next few years of my life. I was pretty desperate, trying anything I could think of to ward off the vampire that constantly invaded my home. At first I slept with a cross over my door, thinking it would help. I tried garlic and holy water and everything else that fairy tales say would keep away vampires, but nothing ever worked. I quit trying to please Linda and stopped talking to Kate altogether.

Linda started hitting me when Kate was away, telling me I should have more respect for my 'aunt' than that, but I took the beatings and never told Kate or anyone else what was going on. And even though I never said a word to Kate she would still sit and tell me stories when she came. I'd sit there silently and watch her, not moving a muscle until she told me I could go. Then I'd run to my room and push the dresser in front of the door so that she couldn't get in to bite me.

Linda hated the way I treated Kate and one day when I was twelve she'd had enough. We were living in Bridgeport at the time and Kate had been there the night before. I'd heard Linda begging her to stay with us for a few days, but Kate had apparently refused because when I came out of my room the next morning, she was gone.

Linda started in on my right away. "You will stop your childish behavior," she told me sternly. "Aunt Kate has never done anything to hurt you. You will treat her with respect when she visits my house, do you understand?"

"I understand that you like it when she bites you," I shot back defiantly. "She's a vampire, how can I respect that?"

She slapped me so hard I fell against the kitchen counter. "Don't talk about her that way," she demanded. "That woman has done more for you than you'll ever know."

I looked up at her through my hair, the side of my face stinging. Linda wasn't the only one who'd had enough. "Is her blood that good," I asked harshly, "that you'd defend her over me? Aren't I supposed to be your 'daughter'?"

That surprised Linda for an instant just before it pissed her off. "You ungrateful bitch," she screamed. She came after me, but I ducked under her arm.

I tried to make it past her out of the house, but she caught my hair and threw me against the refrigerator. I was stunned and I don't really remember what happened next, but I do remember her coming after me with a knife. I tried to block it, but only deflected the blade to my leg. Blood flowed like a river and seemed to bring Linda out of her murderous rage. I

collapsed to the floor and tried to pull the edges of my skin together but the blood made it slippery.

She stood looking down at me for a long moment, her eyes blank and empty. "You'd better put a band-aid on that," she told me finally. "You don't want to stain your clothes."

"I don't think a band aid will work," I told her desperately. I was frightened; I'd never seen so much blood in my life. "Help me," I begged her. "I need to go to the hospital and get stitches."

She turned away. "It's not that bad and I have better things to do," she replied coldly. "See that you treat Kate better the next time she comes or I won't stop at cutting your leg."

I stared after her in disbelief. I couldn't believe that she really wasn't going to help me. The cut wasn't something small that you could put a butterfly band-aid on and call it good. It was at least three inches long and gaped open. I took a dishcloth and pressed it against the wound like I'd seen them do on T.V. but it didn't seem to help.

I tied the cloth as tightly as I could around the wound and limped into the den. I knew there were encyclopedias in there and I remembered that once I'd seen something about wounds in one of them. Quickly finding the one I was looking for, I took it and Linda's sewing kit into the bathroom.

It took me a few minutes to find the page, and when I did it took even longer for me to understand just what it was I was supposed to do, but once I started sewing the cut closed, I got it. It hurt to push the needle through my skin, but I knew it had to be done. Linda wasn't going to take me to the hospital and God only knew when Kate was going to come back. As much as I hated her, I had to admit that she always made sure I was taken care of.

I made sure never to piss Linda off that badly again.

Linda didn't want to move to New York. She hated the house, she hated the neighborhood, she hated her job, and of course she hated me. One Friday she was called to the school because of my fighting. It wasn't the first time she'd had to come get me because I'd gotten in trouble, and it sure wouldn't be the last. I knew when she picked me up that I'd better stay out of her way. I went to my room and turned on my radio, low so I wouldn't bug her. My room was a mess so I cleaned it quickly, hoping to pacify her.

Several hours later she opened the door of my room. Apparently, she'd used those hours to get even more pissed off at me. "This fighting in school is going to stop," she told me as she stalked across the room. I stood up and backed away from her. "Do you think fighting solves everything, you little bitch?"

I tried to duck the fist she swung at me, but she was fast and I couldn't move away in time. I fell back against the dresser and before I could catch my balance she struck again. She kept on hitting me, telling me the whole time that fighting wouldn't get me anywhere. I tried hard not to cry, not to give her that satisfaction, but after a while I couldn't stop myself. It was just like any other time that she'd beaten me, with one exception; Kate walked in.

"What in bloody hell are you doing?" she demanded softly from the doorway. Because she'd been at the house just the night before I know Linda hadn't expected her back so soon.

I curled tighter into the ball I was laying in, waiting for the next blow from Linda. It never came.

"I'm trying to teach her a lesson," Linda replied. Her voice had taken on that pleading tone she always used when she wanted something from Kate. "I'm trying to teach her that fighting isn't the answer to everything."

Kate's cold laughter filled the room. "And you think this is the way to do it?" I looked up through my tears and saw her walk closer to us. "Do you teach her lessons like this often?"

Linda glanced down at me and I saw fear, real fear, in her eyes. I groaned and hid my face; whenever Kate made Linda feel bad, I usually got it doubly worse when the vampire left us.

"Come with me," Kate said in a dangerously soft voice. She took Linda by the hand and led her out of the room.

Slowly and carefully I got to my feet. I kept one hand on the wall for balance and made my way to the bathroom. With a cold washcloth, I cleaned the blood from my face. The swelling wasn't very bad, and I knew it would be gone in a few days. I'd had worse.

It really wasn't safe to go outside in our neighborhood after dark or I would have left the house that night. Instead I went back to my room and sat between my bed and the wall wrapped in blankets. I don't know how much time had passed when Kate came back into the room and sat on the edge of the bed looking down at me.

"Why didn't you tell me she was doing this?" she asked softly.

I didn't answer her, just sat looking up at her defiantly. Did she expect me to run to the nearest monster every time I had problems? Right, then I'd owe her and she'd probably want payment in blood. That wasn't going to happen, not if I could help it.

"You're a stubborn one, Eliza," she murmured. "You'd rather go through a mountain of hurt than come to me with your problems. Do you hate me that much?"

That made me feel bad. She'd never done anything to hurt me; in fact she'd gone out of her way several times to help me out. Still, she was a monster, no matter how nice she tried to be.

When I didn't answer her, she sighed. "I've had a little talk with Linda," she told me. "She won't be hurting you again, I've made sure of that."

I wondered exactly what it was that she'd done.

"You need to let me know when things like this happen," she continued. "How can I protect you if you don't tell me what's going on? You know I only want what's best for you."

Yeah, right. And then next thing you know, people would be walking around on the moon. I didn't buy it, but I wasn't going to argue the point with her. I was sore enough as it was, I didn't need her to get pissed off and decide I needed a 'lesson' too.

Finally she left me alone, but she was right about one thing. Linda never hit me again.

STRENGTH

PLEASE GOD PLEASE, I'D PAY ANY COST
IF YOU'D JUST STOP THE WORLD 'CAUSE I WANNA GET OFF
PRODIGAL SON - KID ROCK

Linda liked Pittsburgh but it was much worse than any place we'd lived before. The street we lived on was mostly boarded up, and it wasn't safe for a girl in her early teens to walk home alone, even in the daylight. It didn't help that I'd had my growing spurt by then and I looked much older than my fourteen years. Linda usually picked me up from school, but some times she 'forgot.'

On one of those forgetful days, I was walking home by myself when I realized I was being followed. I knew enough to stick to the main roads, but my street smarts didn't do me much good that day.

"Hey, bitch," I heard from behind me.

I recognized the voice and stiffened, but still kept walking. Derrick Matthews was bad news and the less I had to do with him the better. I tried walking faster, but he caught up to me and grabbed my arm.

"Don't ignore me, you slut," he growled. He was tall and mean, with a reputation for violence. It was even rumored that he'd killed a girl once just because she broke up with him. I didn't know whether to believe it or not, but I figured I was better off if I just stayed away from him.

I stared up at him defiantly. "What do you want?" I demanded. He was at least a foot taller than I was, but I was more apprehensive than afraid. It was hard to be frightened of a bully when a vampire was a frequent guest in our home.

"You know what I want," he told me, caressing the side of my face. "Let's go in here and I'll show you how." He tugged me toward one of the nearby boarded up houses.

I pulled away. "I don't think so," I replied coldly, stepping away. "Leave me alone before someone gets hurt."

"You'll like the way I hurt you," he drawled.

Somehow I just didn't believe him.

He grabbed my arm again and pulled me tight against his chest. When I started fighting him, he backhanded me across the face. I'd thought that Linda had hit hard, but now I realized that she'd been holding something back all those years. Pain exploded in my head and I stumbled backwards. He caught me before I could fall and pulled me toward the house.

"No," I told him sharply. I tried to pull away, but he hit me again, with a closed fist this time. This one I was ready for and somehow I barely felt the impact. I knew that if he got me into the house I'd be in deep pain before I left it, if I ever left it alive.

I twisted easily out of his hold and punched him in the stomach. He doubled over and I tried to run past him, but he caught me again.

"You little bitch," he said in a low dangerous voice, "I'm going to kill you for that."

Not if I had anything to say about it. I kicked at his knee and felt it buckle under the blow. He punched me in the face again, but I didn't let it faze me. Something had come over me, something I couldn't control. I hit him again, and didn't stop hitting him until somebody pulled me away.

I shook off the hands that were holding me back and stared down at Derrick, stunned. He was lying on the sidewalk, his face covered with blood. He was barely breathing.

"Liza, you need to get out of here," one of the neighborhood boys told me. I could hear sirens in the distance. "The cops will be here any minute, go on!"

"I-I didn't mean—" What exactly had I meant to do?

I felt a hand on my arm and turned to look at my best friend Tara. Her long blond hair hung in two braids down her back and she looked frightened.

"We saw it all," she said urgently. "He was going to kill you. You have to leave or the cops will send you to jail."

"They'll know it was me," I whispered. "I can't just leave."

One of the men who'd been watching from a few feet away came over. "We know what kind of kid he is," he said kindly. "He had it coming. No one will squeal on you, just go."

The siren was getting closer. Tara half pushed me down the street toward my house. I caught myself before I could stumble and started running. I ducked down an alley just before the cop car turned onto the street.

I snuck into the house and into my room, still stunned, but tired and sore too. Had I really done that? Had I really beat Derrick until he'd passed out? I could barely remember moving so fast that it had almost been like he was standing still while I'd attacked him. I think it had taken three people to pull me off of him.

I put a chair under the door and sat down on the bed staring off into space. I thought about what had happened for a long time before I realized that Kate wasn't the only monster in the house. Somehow I had some of her abilities. The only explanation for that was if she'd already been a vampire when I was born.

After a while I pulled a box from under the bed and took out one of the books I kept in it, out of Linda's sight. These were all occult books, and all had something to do with vampires. I'd stolen them from libraries and bookstores over the years. The one I took out was the best reference book I'd ever seen on vamps.

In a chapter near the back of the book was a section on uncommon vampire folklore. I turned to that chapter and found what I was looking for, the mention of the dhampyr, a vampire's child. The book talked of legends in the Baltic area about 'damper', told of some of the abilities they had. One was the ability to recognize a vampire on sight. I could do that sometimes, I'd identified a few others in the different cities we'd lived in over the years. Another was exceptional strength and speed. Given what had happened today, I had to admit I had that one too.

Legends stated that dhampyr were fated to kill vampires, that their lives were spent hunting them down. That part didn't bother me, I didn't particularly like Kate, and from what I could tell, all vamps were like her. What bothered me was that legend stated dhampyr were damned just as their parents were damned.

Aside from this book, I didn't know how I was supposed to live the rest of my life this way. I didn't want to be able to kill someone with a blow to the chest. I didn't want to be faster and stronger than everyone I met. I didn't want to be able to make people do anything I wanted.

I just wanted to be normal.

Tara called me a few hours later to tell me that Derrick was dead. I hung up the phone with numb fingers and ignored it when it rang again. Distantly I knew that Linda had picked

up the phone, and a few minutes later she tried to get into the bedroom. When she couldn't, she started pounding on the door, but I ignored her.

I reached under my pillow and pulled out the knife I kept there. I looked at the blade for a long time before I laid it on the skin of my wrist. I couldn't think, couldn't feel anything, not even the blade sinking into my skin. Blood welled to the surface and dripped onto my lap. I didn't feel the knife go into my other wrist either.

I dropped the knife and laid back on the bed staring up at the ceiling. I felt weak and dizzy, totally detached from the sounds coming from the door. I heard a voice and knew it was Kate's, but that didn't seem important.

A loud crash came from the door and a moment later Kate was standing over me. She took one look at my wrist and I saw hunger fill her eyes. She picked up my hand and I felt her tongue move along the cut. It stung, but I could feel the wound close. I closed my eyes and drifted away.

When I woke up I had an awful taste in my mouth. I blinked at the sunlight falling across the bed and looked over to see Linda sitting in a chair by the bed. She looked pissed.

"If you think I'm going to clean up this mess," she bit out, "you have another thing coming. You'd better hurry, too," she added as she stood up. "Thanks to your 'episode,' we're moving." She walked out of the room without another word.

I sat up slowly and saw that the blood-covered blankets that had been on my bed were lying on the floor. I was willing to bet that Kate had told Linda to clean up before she left, but most of the time Linda only did what Kate wanted where she could see her do it.

There was a glass of water on the bed stand and I drank it quickly to try and get the horrible taste out of my mouth. It didn't help. I looked at my wrists and was amazed to find no sign of the slashes I'd made the night before. I didn't know what Kate had given me, but it had to have been something magical.

I sighed. I was still upset about Derrick, but I didn't know if I could try to kill myself again. And Linda had said we were moving, that meant I only had until sundown to pack the things that were important to me. We always moved at night.

Somehow I knew that Kate would smooth over things with the police, she always did whenever anything bad happened. The thing was that it didn't make me feel any better. I had killed someone. It didn't matter that he'd been trying to hurt me, he was still dead and I could never take that back, ever.

I tried to put the thought out of my mind and pack, but it kept coming back. By the time darkness fell, I'd only boxed up half my things. I didn't even hear Kate come into the room.

"Don't be a fool, Eliza," she told me once I realized she was there. "I asked around about the boy. Did you know that he's killed three girls in the last five years?"

I just looked at her, not sure if I could believe anything she said.

"It's true," she insisted. "He deserved to die." She came over and sat down on the bed. "Do you want to tell me about it?"

It had been years since I'd spoken a single word to her, but now the story just spilled out. I told her everything I could remember, and she sat patiently waiting for me to finish. I couldn't stop the tears that streamed down my cheeks, and when I was done she reached over and wiped them away.

"It's called a frenzy," she said softly. "They don't happen often, usually, but when they do there is no controlling it. Be thankful you're not of Gangrel blood, you'd have a mark of the beast on you now."

I looked at her in confusion. "Gangrel?"

She sighed and took my hand. "Gangrel are a type of vampire," she told me. "I wasn't sure you were touched by the Kindred blood inside of me, but now I know you are. It's time you learned a thing or two about vampires."

As the night passed, she explained to me about vampires, how they called themselves Kindred and were separated into clans. She told me she was Tremere, a vampire clan that used magic to get what they needed. She said that I could learn how if I wanted, but I didn't.

She asked me what kind of weird things had been happening in my life lately. I'd already told her about the unbelievable speed I could call upon, and now I told her about how people would do things for me if I asked them right, even if they'd told me no just a minute before. I could lift and carry more weight than any other girls in school, and more than a lot of the guys. Things that left bruises or cuts on everyone else barely seemed to touch me.

A few hours before dawn she helped me pack the rest of my room and load the car. I rode with Kate and we followed Linda to Atlantic City. Things got better there, and worse. Kate taught me how to control my abilities, but my temper kept getting me into trouble.

We had to move around the city quite a few times because I kept getting in trouble in school. I ran with a fast crowd, fighting, skipping school and stealing. I made sure the boyfriends I had drove fast cars and money to take me as far away from Linda as I could get.

My 'mother' changed drastically when we moved from Pittsburgh. She started drinking a lot, and I could tell it was starting to bother my real mother. Kate started spending more time with me when she visited us, and Linda didn't like that one bit.

Kate tried to talk to me about my temper, but I wouldn't listen. The only thing I wanted from her was to know how to control my abilities. Knowing that I had vampire blood in my veins made me reckless. I never tried to kill myself again, but that's not to say I didn't try to die. I thought I deserved to die, and took great pains to put myself in dangerous situations. I'm actually amazed that I survived the two years we lived in New Jersey.

LEAVING HOME

IT'S JUST THAT WE STAY TOO LONG IN THE SAME OLD SICKLY SCHEME

IT'S BETTER THIS WAY.

FALL OF GRACE - SARAH McLACHLAN

I finally left home when I was seventeen. I'd gotten kicked out of high school for one too many fights and knew Linda would be livid. I couldn't stand it any more, anyway, being with those kids who had no idea what was really out there in the darkness.

Linda dropped me off just like she did every other school morning. She looked hung over, but I knew it was just that Kate hadn't been around in a couple of weeks. I put up with her mood mostly because it would have really set her off if I'd tried to argue. I felt sorry for her, you know?

The high school was the fourth one I'd been to in the city. Linda was bitching because she had to drive me almost twenty minutes every morning, then turn around and pick me up later that afternoon. It probably wouldn't have bothered her so much if I waited for her every day, but there were plenty of times that I found another way home and didn't bother to tell her. Hey, I never said I was a good kid.

But the fight that day wasn't my fault, really. Everybody in school knew that I hit if you pissed me off. If that happened, one of us would be walking away hurting and it sure as hell wasn't likely to be me.

When the quarterback of the football team decided he didn't like the way I treated his girlfriend, he got in my face. I tried to walk away from him, really I did, he just wouldn't let me. When he called me 'white trash' and told me that I didn't belong in his school, I got pissed. Of course it wasn't until he grabbed my arm and tried to pull me outside so he could 'talk' to me some more that I hit him.

Funny thing about football players; they always think they're so tough that only another football player can bring them down. Was it my fault he couldn't take a punch? Another funny thing about football players; they always have the school bigwigs in their pocket. In less than fifteen minutes I was in the principle's office.

"You're expelled," he told me. "I've already talked to your mother, she'll be here shortly to pick you up."

"She's not my mother," I said in a hard voice.

"What are you talking about?" he demanded. "Of course she's your mother."

I laughed harshly. "Linda is not my mother," I repeated. She also wouldn't let me live this down. She'd give me nothing but problems for a long time.

He smiled a nasty smile. "You're just trying to avoid getting in trouble for this, Eliza," he told me. "Maybe you need a sound beating."

Suddenly I knew I couldn't go home, not to stay. I stood up and walked closer to him, looking him in the eye. "When Linda gets here," I said forcefully, "you will tell her I went to New York to be a model."

"I'll tell her that," he said pleasantly.

"I'm going to leave now," I added in the same tone of voice. "Give me your car keys."

"Good bye, Eliza," he replied as he handed them over. "Good luck in New York."

I walked out and drove the principle's car home. I wasn't surprised that he'd done exactly what I'd told him. People had been doing things I wanted them to for years. I tried not to do it, but sometimes it just happened.

When I got home Linda wasn't there. I'd probably passed her somewhere along the way and knew I had to hurry. I shoved everything that was important to me into an old suitcase and grabbed the money I knew Linda kept in the cookie jar. I left the car at the train station and hitched a ride out of town. Half an hour later I was long gone.

It didn't take me very long to find the wildest parties and people that Charleston had to offer. I knew where to find them and I had the looks to be included. Nothing mattered to me at that point in my life and I have to admit I got into some crazy things. Drugs didn't interest me much, but since everyone else was doing them, why not?

At one particularly wild party, I met Eddie Lane. He was dark and wild and everything Linda had ever warned me to stay away from. Which basically guaranteed that I'd be attracted to him, right? I went home with Eddie that night and there I stayed.

I have to say I think Eddie had a death wish. His family had connections and money so he didn't have to work if he didn't want to. Of course he didn't want to, he wanted to party so party we did. Every night it was some place new but the alcohol and the drugs stayed the same. I'd never been much into drugs myself, so it was quite a mind blower.

Eddie was nice enough I guess, but he was never really there. Not that I noticed at the time, I wasn't really there either. I was in some other reality where monsters didn't exist. I should have known better, I couldn't fight monsters when my mind was whacked out on drugs.

When Kate walked into a party a few weeks later, I thought I was seeing things. It was only when she took my hand and led me outside that I realized I wasn't hallucinating.

"What are you doing, Eliza," she asked softly, almost sadly.

"Having the time of my life, mom," I told her, laughing.

She glanced around to see if anyone had been close enough to hear. "If you weren't so stoned, I might have been glad to hear you call me that."

"I'm not stoned," I said self-righteously. "I'm having fun. More fun than I ever had living with Linda."

"Why did you leave?" she asked.

I shrugged and pulled away from her hand. "School sucks," I replied coldly, struggling to regain my wits. "Linda's a bitch and you bite. What did I have to stick around for?"

"Eliza, we could have worked things out," she said kindly, reaching out to touch my face.

Her hand looked like it was coming at me way too fast and I shied away from it only to fall back against the wall of the building. Eddie must have been looking for me, seen me fall away from Kate's hand, and figured she'd hit me because a moment later he hit Kate like a freight train. She went flying.

"What the fuck are you doing, bitch?" he growled at Kate.

She had somehow kept her balance and now turned to look at him. "Eliza, who is this?" she asked calmly. Too calmly.

I reached out and grabbed Eddie's arm. "This is Eddie, Kate," I told her. "Eddie takes care of me. This is Kate," I added, leaning against his side.

"Oh, he's taking real good care of you I see," she drawled. I didn't like the tone of her voice. "Are you the one feeding her drugs?" she asked him.

"I take care of her, like she said," he replied with a boyish grin. "If you like, I'll take care of you, too."

Somehow I didn't think what Kate wanted from him was drugs, or a lust filled evening. The hunger in her eyes said she wanted something else.

"Eddie, lets go home," I said softly, desperately. "Please, I don't feel so good."

He looked down at me. "Alright," he told me, then looked back at Kate. "Any time you want me to take care of you let me know."

She smiled an evil smile. "Don't worry, I will."

Eddie took me home and I tried to warn him about Kate. I couldn't get specific without telling him what she was, and he wouldn't listen when I told him she was dangerous. I tried to stay awake to watch over him, but between the alcohol and the drugs, I passed out.

When I woke up that afternoon, Eddie was gone. None of his friends had seen him since we'd left the party the night before, but some of them remembered Kate. She'd asked around about him, and one of his friends had told her where we lived. I never found any sign that Kate had been in the apartment, but after two days of looking I never found any sign of Eddie either.

I knew where he kept his money and I took it all, close to a thousand dollars. I left town and changed my name hoping that Kate wouldn't be able to track me. I also vowed never to let anything cloud my brain so much that I couldn't deal with Kate if she ever showed up again.

RUNNING

WE CAN BREAK THE CYCLE, WE CAN BREAK THE CHAIN
WE CAN START ALL OVER IN THE NEW BEGINNING
NEW BEGINNING - TRACY CHAPMAN

I thumbed my way to Savannah Georgia, stopping at a lot of little towns on the way and giving different names at every one of them. I even backtracked a few times hoping that Kate wouldn't be able to follow my trail. I kept to the back alleys and pool halls because I knew how to hide in those kinds of places.

In Savannah I met Vince. He was tall and handsome and had a worse attitude than I'd ever thought about having, which was really saying something. I'd finally found someone angrier than I was, something I really never expected to find.

He fed and clothed me in return for letting me move into the apartment he had over a bar. I played that game, it was better than sleeping on the streets. At least, it was until the night he decided to hit me. By the time I left town later that night I'd broken four of his ribs and his jaw in two places. I'd like to think that the next time he decided to teach a girl a lesson, he thought of me and didn't do it.

After that I moved through a lot of different towns working odd jobs. I knew I was running from myself, but I had to make sure that Kate never found me again. I figured that she'd try and make me go back with her and that was something I wasn't willing to do.

Late that fall I rolled into Atlanta with a trucker bound for Mobile. As much as I wanted to go on with him to Alabama, he gave me the creeps so I slipped away at a truck stop. A few doors down was a biker bar and I went inside. It felt good to be somewhere warm and dry.

The bar was filled with bikers and their women and while the men seemed happy to see a new female face, none of the women were. I sat down at the end of the bar and ordered coffee and a sandwich.

A few minutes later a tall biker bitch came over to stand a little too close to me. I'd seen her when I first came in sitting on the lap of a particularly large biker. I tried to ignore her because I didn't want a fight. I just wanted to eat and get back on the road.

"Hey, bitch," the woman growled when I didn't look up. "We don't want you here."

I sighed and sat my coffee cup down. "Is that so?"

"Yeah," she replied, her voice and body language very aggressive.

Looked like I was putting off eating for a little while. I stood up and looked at the woman, not giving way an inch. Two could play the intimidation game. "I don't remember asking your permission to be here," I told her coldly.

She seemed surprised that I was standing up to her. I have to admit I didn't have the same taste in clothes that she had, jeans and a sweater didn't really compare to leather and lace. Still, did she think I was a wimp? If she did, she'd never been more wrong about anything in her life.

"You're in over your head," she warned me. "Maybe you should go home to momma."

I smiled dangerously. "I think you're in over your head. Maybe you'd better go back to being a lap dog, bitch."

When she swung at me, I was ready. I blocked her punch and threw a few of my own before she could even blink. She fell back against a table, knocking it over. I turned back to the bar and sat down again.

I'd just taken a bite of my sandwich when she came at me again. My elbow caught her in the stomach before she could wrap the chain around my neck. I popped a fry in my mouth then bent to pick up the chain.

Before she could stand up, I kicked her in the face. Not real hard, just hard enough to stun her. I glanced around to make sure no one else was going to join in before I pulled her hands behind her back and wrapped the chain around them tightly. I grabbed a knife from my boot and put the thin blade through several of the links to secure her to the floor.

"Stay, bitch," I drawled before I got back on my stool and started eating again. When she would have yelled at me, I looked at her threateningly. "Unless you want to be gagged, you'll shut your mouth," I told her. "I don't like yippy dogs." She shut her mouth.

I was just finishing my coffee when the biker she'd been sitting on came over and sat down next to me. He didn't see the knife in my hand.

"I'm Chain," he said. "Nice moves."

"Thanks," I replied abruptly. I was watching him out of the corner of my eye trying to be ready for anything he might pull.

"Peg always did need a set down," he added. "Can I buy you a beer?"

I turned to look at him. "Look, I don't know what you want, but I'm not interested. You can have your bitch back, as long as she doesn't come at me again."

He grinned. "You new in town?" When I nodded slowly, he went on. "I don't want what you might be thinking I do. Peg's my bitch, and yeah, I want her back, but you might wanna think about joining us."

That surprised me. "Why?"

He looked me over carefully. "You look like you're running from something," he said softly. "I'd say you look like you can't take care of yourself, but you just proved you can. I think you could teach our girls a thing or two, and maybe learn something too. Anyway, whatever you're running from isn't likely to find you with us." He turned and gestured at the rest of his gang who were watching me closely.

Chain had a point, Kate would never look for me with a biker gang. And even if she did, these guys looked like they could take out a freakin' army. Every single one of them was armed to the teeth. I looked back at Chain, really looked at him searching for some way to know that I could trust him. In his aura I found the proof I needed that he was sincere.

I put my knife away and let Peg up, unwrapping the chain and handing it to her man. He took it with a smile and threw one end over his shoulder.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Why don't you give me one," I suggested. I still didn't want to use my own name, it would have made it too easy for Kate to find me.

"You look all soft, but you have claws like a kitten," he said after a minute. "How 'bout 'Kit'?"

"Whatever," I said with a shrug.

That was the beginning of my life with the Raging Wheels. I stayed with them for a little over a year and Chain was right, we taught each other a lot. They found some of my habits amusing until the night I staked a biker from a rival club for trying to bite me. I patiently explained to the guy that I didn't want to be bit and pulled the stake back out. I think they were more than a little surprised when he apologized and hurried away.

Rock was one of the more quiet guys of the gang, and I never did figure out how he'd gotten involved in the gang. He didn't have a bitch so I more or less fell in with him. It was convenience more than anything, I needed someone to ride with and he needed a friend that talked about more than motorcycles.

He was really good with knives and one day I asked him to show me how to throw them. He took me into the back yard of the house the gang had taken over and spray painted a target on the privacy fence. He showed me how to hold the knife and how to throw it then demonstrated a few times until I thought I knew how he was doing it.

When I threw the knife and it hit almost dead center of the target, Rock gave a low whistle. "God, Kit, you got the gift."

I shrugged. "I just threw it."

"Yeah, but you hit it," he drawled as he handed me another knife. "Can you do it again?"

Once more I aimed at the target and let the knife fly. It ended up right next to the first one, so close the handles were touching. "I guess I can."

After that I practiced throwing things a lot. Stakes were a little harder than knives until I figured out how to cut them so they balanced better. Things were good for a while, or as good as they could be in a biker gang.

Everyone else drank and partied heavily, but I stayed clear of it. My staying sober caused a little resentment from some of the gang members, mostly from Peg. She didn't like me and never tried to pretend that she did. Chain and my fists kept her in line, for the most part.

Living with the biker gang taught me the code of the street. The most important thing to know is that it's everyone for themselves out there. When the last dime in your pocket could mean the difference between living and dying, you don't give it up to someone else.

The only problem I ever had with that was kids. They can't fight for themselves, they're too small to be able to defend their territory or belongings, and they tend to get sick real easy. I helped all the kids I could as long as no one was looking.

Why help only when no one could see? The thing is, if you help someone weaker than you then you owned them until they could pay you back in some way. Same thing if someone helped you. Little things didn't count like that, it was the big, life saving ones that mattered. If no one saw me helping, they couldn't make the kid pay could they?

About a year after I'd met up with them, the gang brought in a new member. I didn't like him on sight, mostly because he was a vampire. He kept offering me his blood, and I kept telling him to leave me the hell alone. Chain chose to stay out of the whole thing, he knew that the strongest men got the women they wanted, and if Ace wanted me Rock had to give me up or fight. Not that any of them knew what Ace was.

One night Ace snuck into the room I shared with Rock and tried to bite me. Rock was passed out and never woke up when Ace got a little too close to the end of my stake and found himself helpless on the floor. That was the night I knew I couldn't stay with the Raging Wheels any longer, I knew that it was time for me to leave.

The thing was that if I left Ace... alive, I knew he'd kill Rock when he found out I was gone. Rock wouldn't leave the gang, I couldn't stay, and I couldn't leave him with Ace. That left me with only one choice.

I took what money and jewelry I found on Ace before I cut his head off. It was my first vampire kill and seeing him disintegrate on the floor almost freaked me out. I wondered if killing a dead thing was enough to send you to hell, but at that point I didn't really care. I was

more concerned with making sure that nothing happened to Rock than anything else. Besides, he was just a vamp, right? He'd been dead long before I staked him.

I mopped Ace's remains up and took his weapons and clothes with me when I left. I couldn't drive his bike, but I pushed it almost five miles down the road to a bar I knew the Raging Wheels never went to. I sold it for a hundred bucks and caught a Greyhound to South Carolina.

In Columbia I changed my name again and tried to keep to myself. I found a job waiting tables at a sleazy restaurant and didn't try to make any friends. I liked the town, but it was lonely. I stayed in one of those rat trap motels you see in third rate movies for a while, but eventually I saved enough money to get into an apartment with another girl who was a frequent customer.

It was strange to be living with a 'normal' person. Maria worked at a grocery store and didn't have a boyfriend. She was quiet and shy, not a thing like me. It was too good to last and I knew it. By the next summer she had a boyfriend and she quietly, shyly, told me that I'd have to leave. I'd had it with South Carolina anyway, so I moved on.

Three months later I found myself in Raleigh, Virginia. I'd just turned twenty, but I felt so much older. It took me some time to find work there, so for a while the streets were my home. I'd seen homeless people before, even been friends with a few, but it was nothing like living on the streets myself. I hated every minute of it.

I saw vamps almost everywhere around town, which was no big surprise. But there was this one area of Raleigh that strangely enough I never saw any vamps in. Right in the middle of the neighborhood was a big Catholic Church that just happened to have a homeless shelter around back. I stayed there sometimes, but I felt weird doing it, mostly because I couldn't seem to make myself believe in God.

One of the priests there, Father Donovan, was a pretty decent guy. I talked to him a few times, but he couldn't understand why I was so sure that the church couldn't do anything for me. What was I supposed to say, my mother's a vamp, I was damned at birth? I don't think that would have gone over too well, especially given what I learned later.

You see the church was a front for a secret organization called the Society of Leopold. It's a big name that really doesn't mean anything until you know that they used to be known as the Inquisition. Makes a little more sense now, doesn't it?

Yeah, Father Donovan was really a hunter, and so were most of the other people that worked in the church and the shelter. They did a lot of things for the poor people of the area, but they also killed any preternatural creature they could get their hands on. I was damned glad they didn't get their hands on me.

I only found out about them because one night I killed another vamp. She was stalking this little homeless kid and I stepped in front of her just as she was reaching for him. The vamp was surprised to say the least, and even more surprised when I didn't run in fear at her show of fangs. The stake I shoved into her heart froze that expression on her face.

Father Donovan's voice nearly scared me to death. "I wasn't aware you knew about these demons," he said softly from behind me.

I spun ready to fight until I saw who it was. "I could say the same for you," I told him.

He looked down at the body. "It is an abomination. God has decreed that these unclean things be destroyed."

Yeah, whatever. "You do this as a sideline?"

"When the occasion calls for it," he admitted with a smile. "Actually we have been looking for this one for quite some time. How did you manage to catch it?"

It was my turn to smile. "Just lucky, I guess. Do you want it for something special or can I just cut its head off?"

He seemed surprised at my statement. "By all means."

I bent over the vamp and it only took a few moments for me to take the head off. Father Donovan watched every move I made and when I was done he nodded approvingly.

"You look like you've done this before," he murmured.

"Once," I told him. "They have a tendency to want to bite things I'd rather they didn't."

"This particular leach had a bounty on his head," he told me. "By rights its yours."

I looked at him in surprise. "A bounty?"

"Yes," he replied. "This one had been feeding from the homeless children for several months. We have placed a five hundred-dollar bounty on its head. It is yours, if you want it."

Damn, what I couldn't do with five hundred dollars. "Yeah, I want it." There was a family that stayed not too far from where I normally slept that could use some help. If I played it right, they'd never know who helped them.

Father Donovan took me back to the church and gave me the money, then asked if I was interested in joining their organization. He explained about the Society and how God had charged them with destroying evil in the world. It all sounded a little too fanatical to me so I turned him down.

Still, from time to time the good Father came to me and asked me to help out on a vampire hunt. Sometimes I'd help him, sometimes I wouldn't, it depended on the hunt. See, that was long before I took hunting personally and Father Donovan had to convince me that the vamp was bad news before I would join the hunt.

Most of the money I collected from the Society went to families that needed it a lot more than I did. That's not to say I didn't use any of the money myself, of course I did. Once in a while I'd stay the night in a hotel just to get a real bath, or I'd buy new clothes and go into a nice restaurant to eat.

I was real careful not to put myself in a position where I owed anyone, or where anyone owed me. Yeah, I gave money to some of the poor people on the streets, but they never knew where it came from. I didn't want to be obligated to watch over anyone, and I sure as hell didn't want to owe anyone else my life. I just wanted to be left alone.

Eventually I found a job waiting tables at some dive downtown and the bartender, Barry, let me sleep in the back room. It wasn't too bad, really. It kept me out of the rain and away from the vamps, for the most part. I didn't mind hunting them with Father Donovan if the job was right, but I'd rather have stayed away from them if I could.

Raleigh wasn't too bad, but I still felt like something was missing in my life. I didn't know what it was or how to find it, so I just lived from day to day, keeping to myself as much as I could. Barry used to tell me that everyone needed someone to count on, but I just laughed at him. I knew by then that I didn't need anyone because the only person I could count on was me.

THE PACK

I AM IN A LIVING HELL
MAKES ME WONDER IF I'M ALIVE
CAN'T SEEM TO BRING MYSELF TO FIGURE OUT WHY
TIME BOMB - GODSMACK

One of the regulars at the bar was a werewolf. Not that I knew it right away, at first he just looked dangerous. He moved like a predator, always looking for something to prey on. I'd never been around any shapeshifters but he made me uncomfortable so I always tried to keep my distance from him, but he figured that out pretty quickly and soon took to sitting at my tables. I guess he started thinking that I was the prey.

One night when he'd drank a little more than usual he pulled me down onto his lap. I 'accidentally' elbowed him in the neck on the way down, but he didn't seem to feel it.

"Hey, girly," he slurred drunkenly.

"Let me up," I said carefully. I didn't want to piss him off because I wasn't sure what he would do and I wanted to walk away from this guy alive.

"You think you're too good for me?" he demanded. The whisky on his breath was almost enough to make me drunk too.

"No, I don't," I told him honestly. "I don't want any trouble, just let me go."

He shoved his face into the back of my neck and inhaled. His hands tightened on my waist and he stood up, lifting me easily. "I'm just going to take this one outside," he said to the bartender. "I'll be back in a minute."

I tried to pry his hands off of me, but he was way too strong. I even tried to boost my own strength, but that didn't do any good either. As soon as we got outside the back door, he shifted into something else. That's when I realized he was a werewolf and I knew I was in big trouble.

His hands had grown and became covered with fur, and now they reached all the way around my waist. He threw me forward and I landed in a pile of garbage and rolled to my feet. For a heartbeat I was terrified, then I started looking for a way to get out of this mess. I had a knife, but I figured that trying to cut him with it would only piss him off.

"Look, man," I began, "it's nice that you're all big and furry, but I got work to do. Can we finish this some other time?"

"You're not freaking out," he growled. He didn't seem drunk at all now. "That just proves my point."

"You got a point?" I asked as I put my back to the alley wall. "Can we get to it so I can go back to work?"

"Very funny," he told me. He didn't look amused. "Who's your master?"

I had no idea what he was talking about. "I don't have a master."

"You smell like a vampire," he said softly. It was weird to hear the half-wolf talk, I could barely understand him.

"I'm not a vamp," I replied, showing him the skin of my arm as I edged toward the door to the bar. "See? I've got a tan."

"You're a ghoul," he growled. "Take me to your master. I've got a deal for him."

"Look, I don't know what you're talking about," I insisted. "I don't have a master and I don't even know what a ghoul is."

That seemed to piss him off. "I'm not in the mood for games, bitch." He took a step toward me and I moved back until the alley wall came up against my back. "I want in with the vamps and you're my ticket."

"I couldn't get you a bus ticket," I told him honestly. "I don't know any vamps." None that I hadn't killed for the Society, anyway.

He growled and it wasn't a pleasant sound. He lifted his hand to hit me and in the dim light I could see that he had sharp claws on the end of each finger. I remember thinking that those must have been the point he'd been talking about when something just as big as he was hit him from the side and I went flying.

The fight between the two werewolves was grisly, to say the least. Both were incredibly fast and unbelievably strong. By the time the fight was over they were both covered in blood and one of them was dead. I picked myself up off the ground looked down at the body. As I watched it changed back into the guy who'd carried me from the bar.

"Are you alright?"

I looked up to see that the other werewolf had shifted back to human form. He was still covered with blood, but he definitely looked like a man.

"Yeah," I whispered. "What are you?"

He bent over and ripped a fairly clean piece of clothing from the dead man. "The question is what are you," he told me. "You should have been running in terror ten minutes ago."

"From a fight?" That wasn't my style.

"From two Garou," he corrected me as he cleaned the worst of the blood from his face and hands. "You can see through the veil, most people can't."

"Yeah, well I'm not most people," I replied coolly.

"The Ronin thought you were a ghoul," he said, dropping the bloody cloth to the ground. "Are you? And don't lie, I know the truth when I smell it."

I frowned. "Why the fuck would I lie?" I demanded. "I don't even know what a damn ghoul is unless you're talking about Renfield, and I'm not insane." I'd seen all the old vampire movies a long time ago looking for ways to protect myself against Kate.

He smiled a little. "Renfield was a ghoul, but you don't have to be insane to be one," he told me. "I have to admit, you smell ghouled. You know about vampires then?"

"I know," I admitted. "I know enough to stay the fuck away from them."

"That's good," he said with a nod. "You realize that he would have killed you."

I looked down at the body. "Yeah."

"What's a girl like you doing in a place like this?" he asked softly. He walked closer to me and I looked at him warily. "You look way too young for the streets."

I smiled grimly. "I'm old enough to drink, I guess I'm old enough for the streets."

He didn't believe me and there was a look in his eye I didn't like. "You don't even look old enough to drive. Where do you live?"

"Why do you care?" I demanded.

"Look, girl," he growled. "I just saved your life. Don't you think you owe me something?"

That's what it came down to, wasn't it? He had saved my life and according to the street code I'd lived by for the last few years, he owned me in whatever way he wanted until I could

repay the debt. I looked down and sighed. "Barry lets me stay in the storage room," I whispered.

"Wait here," he ordered. He turned and went into the bar.

I waited.

When he came back out he had my things and told me that I wasn't working there anymore. He put a hand on my shoulder and led me through the alley and out onto another street. We walked in silence until we reached a Camero parked a few blocks down. He gestured for me to get in and when I did he got in too.

"What's your name?" he asked as he started the car.

"Eliza," I replied tonelessly. I didn't even think about lying to him but I sure as hell wasn't giving him a last name.

"I'm Raven-runs-the-night," he told me, "but you can call me Raven. You got a problem with leaving town?"

"I got no problem with it." I stared out the window and wondered how long it would take me to pay off my debt. "Look, I don't know what you think you can get from me, but I got nothing."

He reached over and touched my hair. I wanted to hit him, but I'd seen the way he'd kicked the other werewolf's ass. "You've got plenty," he drawled.

It was wicked obvious what he wanted from me. I turned away from his hand and stared back out the window. Raven wouldn't be the first man to expect that kind of payment, but I vowed that he'd be the last one to get it.

He put the car in gear and soon we'd left Raleigh far behind. A few hours later he pulled into the driveway of a house in Lynchburg. It was a large, older house, and there were a lot of cars parked in the yard. I grabbed my bag and followed him inside where half a dozen people were engrossed in some kind of argument. When we came in they stopped.

"Did you get him?" one of the guys asked.

"I did," Raven replied calmly.

"Who's the bitch?" a woman asked.

"That's Eliza," he drawled. "She'll be staying with us for a while."

One of the men came close to me and bent to smell the skin of my shoulder. "She's not kin and she's not Garou," he stated harshly. "She'll be running soon enough."

I stared back at him angrily. I didn't run from my obligations, and I certainly wasn't afraid of some werewolf wannabe. "Back off," I warned him. I still had my knife and I'd use it on him if he got too close.

He looked at me in surprise. "You think you can take me?"

I smiled coldly. "You wanna step outside?"

"Enough," Raven barked. He was looking at me like he hadn't expected me to show a backbone. "This is Lance-through-the-heart," he told me. "You will defer to him."

"Look," I said quietly, holding on to my rage by threads, "I owe you and I accept that but I don't owe this guy a damn thing. If he wants to throw down and see who ends up on top, I'll be more than happy to."

Raven rolled his eyes, obviously thinking that a little thing like me couldn't possibly win against a nearly six foot tall man. "Take it out back."

As soon as those words were spoken, a strange howling went through the people in the room. We were carried through the door on a wave of people, and given room to fight. I threw my bag at Raven's feet and looked at him.

"Weapons?" I asked. When he shook his head I set about disarming myself. Lance's eyes got really big when he saw me drop a knife and two wooden stakes at Raven's feet.

"Been fighting vamps?" Lance asked, obviously amused at the thought.

"Been known to," I told him seriously. I dropped my jacket on top of my bag and turned to face him. The night was a little chilly, but it was just right for a brawl.

At first Lance was stupid enough to think I couldn't possibly beat him, me being a girl and all. It only took a few minutes for him to realize that I could fight better than he thought I could. He was strong and fast, but I was faster. Ten minutes later I was sitting on his back, one of his arms twisted upward almost to the point of breaking.

He made a mewling sound that I didn't understand, but when Raven told me to let him go I did. There was a look of respect in Raven's eyes when he told me that Lance had yielded to me. I picked up my things and followed him through the silent crowd of people into the house.

He led the way upstairs to a large bedroom that was clean and almost militarily neat. I walked over to stand near the window as he shut the door. I could hear him moving around but I didn't have to look to see what he was doing. I heard the bed move beneath his weight but still didn't turn around.

"Come on, girl," he said sternly.

"I'm not ready for this," I told him.

"You owe me," he reminded me. The code of the street said that he owned me, and that meant I had to do whatever he wanted me to do, even this.

"That's not what I'm talking about," I replied irritably. "I'm not *prepared*, I wasn't expecting to get laid." The code didn't say anything about having babies to repay the debt.

He was quiet for a long moment. "You're talking about birth control."

Duh. "Yeah. I don't have anything."

"If you get pregnant, I'll keep it," he said matter-of-factly.

I turned to shoot him a hard look. "I will not get pregnant," I told him. "We will not screw unless there is no chance of a baby." I didn't want to have kids, ever. I didn't want to taint them with Kate's blood the way I'd been tainted and I'd never loved a man enough to take the risks.

We argued for a while about it mostly because Raven, like most of his kind, wanted children to carry on the Garou bloodline. Of course I couldn't tell him the truth about what I was, but I was able to convince him that I'd fight him every step of the way without birth control. He finally gave up in disgust and sent one of the others out for rubbers, then sat watching me broodingly while we waited for him to come back.

For the most part, Raven was a pretty good guy. The rest of the people in the house were his pack of Garou and kinfolk, what the Garou call their family members that don't have the ability to shape shift. They hadn't liked seeing me win over Lance, and they each wanted to have a go at me. Raven figured the only way that would be fair was if he taught me how to fight Garou.

When he did and the dust finally settled, I knew exactly where I stood in the pack. Surprisingly enough I'd beaten a few of the younger Garou, and lost to some of the older kinfolk. My ability to fight, to resist pain, and to keep going in a fight earned their respect.

One of the kinfolk knew a type of magic called Hedge Magic. If you ask a mage, he'll tell you it isn't real magic, I couldn't tell you what the difference is. Anyway, this kinfolk tried to use it on me once to try and calm me down when I was mad at him. It didn't work, at least not the way he intended. It pissed me off. Needless to say he never tried that again.

Raven's Aunt Rhea kept a garden behind the house. It was small, but she seemed to grow mass quantities of food out of it. When I asked her if I could help her with it, she showed me how she got so much out of such a little garden. I discovered that not only did I like plants and gardening, but that I was good at it.

I struggled with the gardening and farming books she had, but I couldn't seem to grasp the concepts they tried to teach. When I realized that I could learn more from watching Rhea, I gave up the reading part and went straight to getting my hands dirty.

Raven hated vamps and it seemed natural that he'd ask me to help the pack kill them. It wasn't like I hadn't done it before, so I agreed. I owed him, after all, and this was one way I could pay back my debt. We hunted quite a few vamps in Lynchburg, but every time we killed one it seemed like there were three more to take its place.

He didn't let me be as selective as I'd been in Raleigh, either. To the pack, a vamp was a vamp. From what I saw, they were right. Every one of our hunts turned ugly in the end. Once one of the kinfolk that hunted with us didn't get out of the way soon enough and he died. I hadn't liked the guy that much, but seeing him dead still bothered me.

I got my first scar from hunting in Lynchburg. It was my own fault, I wasn't fast enough and the vamp got me across the lower back with her claws. It burned like hell and took me a long time to heal. I knew I could heal it faster if I used my blood the way Kate had taught me, but I didn't want to make Raven suspicious by speed healing.

All in all the pack seemed to tolerate me well enough, but they never lost an opportunity to remind me that I didn't belong. I didn't bother to tell them that I didn't much like being there either. I tried to bide my time patiently until I either worked off my debt to Raven or I found some way to save his life.

The thing is, by nature I'm not a patient person and I kept losing my temper. Raven eventually figured out that his people would never really accept me, or maybe he got tired of me, I don't know. The next spring he gave me some money and put me on a bus to Richmond.

HARD LESSONS

EVERY TIME I START TO BELIEVE,
SOMETHING'S RAPED AND TAKEN FROM ME... FROM ME.
FREAK ON A LEASH - KORN

In Richmond I found a job at a greenhouse taking care of the plants. I'd learned a lot from Rhea and it helped that I knew more than any of the other employees about the plants, even the boss' son. Of course, he didn't like that too much, or maybe he didn't like me telling him no. One night the two of us were working the closing shift when he cornered me in the back room.

"Come on," he said softly, reaching for my hair. "This could be good for both of us if you just relax."

I moved back trying to avoid his hands. "I don't think so," I told him. "Look, I just want to do my job, I don't want any trouble with you."

"Then relax." He grabbed my shoulders and pulled me toward him. I pushed him back and he looked a little surprised.

"No, Jim," I repeated. "I'm sorry, but I don't want to lose my job." I was trying really hard not to hurt him, but if he didn't let me go soon he was in for some serious pain.

Then he grabbed my wrists and tried to kiss me. I twisted away and punched him once in the stomach. He doubled over and I danced out of his reach.

"Oh, God," I said urgently, knowing I'd just blown my job. "Jim, I didn't mean to hurt you."

"Keep away from me, bitch," he hissed. "Get out of here."

"I've got to finish—"

"You are finished," he told me harshly. "I'll make sure of that. You should have played nice."

Somehow I thought the boss would listen to my side of the story so I went in the next day and tried to explain but you know, you just can't trust people. I should've learned that by then.

I don't know if he wouldn't believe what his son was really like or if he didn't care, but either way I found myself out of a job. It was just another thing I should have known better about, really. What made me think a freak like me could live a normal life?

After that I stuck to the bars and cheap restaurants I'd worked at since I left home. It was hard work most of the time, and never paid well, but it was better than living on the streets. I couldn't keep any one job for long, my temper saw to that. Bars were the worst for that, of course. Some drunk would try to get a little too warm and fuzzy with me and I'd have to hit him.

I was working at a little coffee shop downtown when I met Megan. She was a pretty little thing, but so naive. She thought the whole world was sunshine and roses, and I didn't have the heart to tell her how wrong she was. I did keep an eye on her though, and when her boyfriend got a little rough, he found himself in the hospital. He said that a bunch of guys jumped him and stole his wallet, I guess he didn't want to admit that I kicked his ass all by myself.

Of course he didn't stick around long after that, he went on to some other chick that didn't have someone to look after her. Thinking back on it, I probably should have left well enough alone; the abusive asshole was much better than the monster she ended up with.

She met him one night when I wasn't working, and by the time I knew what was going on, she'd already tasted his blood. When she told me about it I went off, but that just drove her away from me. How do you convince an addict that their drug of choice is not good for them? You don't.

Megan refused to tell me who the vamp was, and it took me almost a week to find him. I watched him for a few nights trying to figure out just what I could do to help her. If I killed him and she found out about it, she'd never forgive me. If I didn't do something about it, I'd never forgive myself.

When she finally calmed down, I tried to talk to her about it, but she wouldn't listen.

"You don't understand," she told me pleadingly. "He's so wonderful, he makes me feel more alive than I've ever felt in my life. He loves me, how can I stop seeing him?"

"It's just the blood," I tried to tell her. "It's like any other addiction, you have to break it."

She just laughed. "I'm not addicted to it, silly. I can stop any time I want to. I don't want to."

That was it in a nutshell. Megan was lost to her addiction and there was nothing I could do to stop it, or her. I pretended to understand and eventually she took me to dinner to meet her master. After a few minutes she went to the bathroom and left us alone.

Of course the first words out of his mouth were, "Who's your master?"

I gave him a level look. "I don't have one."

His face closed down, his eyes glittering dangerously. "But you have Kindred blood inside of you," he stated bluntly.

I tried to look confused. "What's a Kindred?"

He kept looking at me intensely. "Tell me who your master is," he said forcefully.

I knew he was trying the trick I knew how to do. "I don't have one," I said honestly, but the fact that he'd tried to charm me pissed me off.

"Then I can only assume your master has been destroyed," he murmured. "Would you like a new one? You seem much more proficient at certain skills than Megan could ever be."

"Are you asking if I want to take her place or join her?" I really didn't like the way I thought this was going, but I had to find out if I was right.

"I do not have the status in the city for two servants," he told me softly.

"So you would let her go?" If he said yes, I'd spare his... well, it wasn't a life really, was it? His existence.

"You know better than that," he chided. "Once a mortal knows of the Kindred, they cannot be allowed to run free. Besides, do you really think the bond between us would be broken that easily?"

Her addiction certainly wouldn't be. "You're talking about killing her."

He waved his hand dismissively. "I'm offering you a chance to drink the blood again," he said heatedly. "To taste once more of the vitae of life."

Before I could say anything to that, Megan came back to the table. It made me sick to see him put his arm around her and pretend to be the devoted lover when he'd talked about killing her just a few minutes earlier. Of course he let the subject drop, but every time I met his eye I knew that he was asking me again and again to be his slave.

I made my excuses as soon as I could, but before I left I looked at him meaningfully. "About that offer you made?" I said softly. "I'm sorry but I have to refuse. There is too much at stake for me to accept."

"What did you offer?" Megan asked, looking up at him trustingly.

"It was nothing, ma petit," he told her, still staring at me.

I said my good-byes and left, but something nagged at me. I'd refused, but would he think I'd done it just because of Megan? Would he kill her anyway hoping that I would change my mind when she was out of the way?

When she showed up for work that afternoon I was so relieved to see her that I hugged her. She seemed confused at my affection and quickly backed away. She asked me what the vamp had offered, but I made up something about a job and she seemed satisfied with that.

I kept trying to talk her out of seeing the vamp and eventually she went cold and distant on me. A few weeks later she didn't show up for work. Since she'd never not showed without calling in, I was instantly concerned. She wasn't at her apartment or any of the other places I knew she liked to visit.

It didn't take me long to find the vamp, he was waiting for me at my apartment. I could feel him there before I even unlocked the door.

"Eliza, dear," he drawled. "So good to see you again."

"Yeah," I replied coldly. "It's too bad that legend isn't true."

"The one about vampires entering a home without permission?" He smiled. "Created by quaint peasants to make themselves feel safer in the darkness."

I shook my head. "Should I feel safe? Where's Megan?"

"It is unfortunate that she was in a car accident earlier this evening," he told me, his voice sounding quite sad. "She is no longer with us."

Since I'd already tried all the hospitals and police departments in town, I knew that wasn't true. "A car accident," I repeated. "Are you sure she didn't accidentally fall on your fangs and bleed to death?"

He pretended to be offended. "My dear girl," he protested. "Do you really believe I would do such a thing?"

I walked a little closer to him. "Yes, I do," I told him as I pulled a stake from the small of my back. He didn't see me do it. "I think you killed her because you thought I'd agree to become your slave if she was dead."

"Once you taste my vitae, it will all come back to you," he assured me with a smile.

The smile on his face froze when the stake went through his heart. "Not tonight, asshole," I told him harshly as he fell to the ground at my feet.

Megan was dead and this vamp had killed her to get to me. I felt so guilty that it I couldn't breathe. I put my fist through the wall a couple of times and broke a few things before I could calm down enough to pull the knife at my waist. It only took a minute to cut his head off, and that left a mess on the floor I wasn't about to clean up.

I packed my things and went to the restaurant for my last check. By sunrise I was on my way out of town, running from the truth. I'd caused Megan's death; if she hadn't been my friend, if I hadn't interfered with her life, she'd still be alive. She might have been watching the sun coming up with a black eye or a few bruises, but at least she'd be alive.

Protecting the innocent was too much for me; I'd been poison to Megan, destroying what I'd tried so hard to save. I vowed that I would never again try to make friends with a 'normal' person. At least the monsters didn't die when I tried to help them.

BALTIMORE

I'M A FIST OF RAGE IN A BROKEN STATE

I'M A RAZOR BLADE CUTTING THROUGH A WRIST OF HATE

FIST OF RAGE - KID ROCK

At first Baltimore was a cold and lonely place. I found a job at a biker bar, but that didn't last very long. The economy was going down, or so they said on the street, and I did odd jobs whenever I could to try and make ends meet.

There was a church in town, St. Joan's, that drew my attention. There was every sign that it was a Society house, and I debated checking to see if they had any contracts available. In the end I never went close to it. I'd hated every minute of the hunts I'd been on in Raleigh, and I didn't really want to do that again unless I had no other choice.

I kept everyone at a distance, even the people at the shelters I ended up staying at when winter started coming on. My bad attitude and willingness to fight combined with my anger made sure that I didn't get close to anyone.

And I was angry, those first six months in Baltimore. I was angry with the whole world, especially myself. It was like I went back to how I was right after I'd killed Derrick. I was reckless, putting myself in danger every night. If I hadn't learned how to fight in the ten years I'd been on the road, I never would have walked away from a lot of those fights alive.

Food was scarce, but even harder to find than some place warm to sleep. I took to watching convenience store dumpsters, waiting for the one day of the week that they threw away expired food. On those days I wasn't the only one dumpster diving, just the strongest. Still, I tried to make sure that the street kids had enough to eat, and that meant that I still went hungry more often than not.

One morning I was sleeping in an abandoned car when a sound woke me up. I was awake instantly and was reaching for a stake when I realized that the man who'd opened the car door was human. Drunk and stupid, but human.

It only took half a minute for me to climb out the other side of the car. I grabbed my bag from the front seat and turned to walk away, but the drunk had come around the car and now he grabbed my arm to turn me to face him.

I pulled my arm free and glared up at him. "What the fuck do you want?" I demanded.

"You're so pretty," he slurred. He leered at me and reached out to touch my hair. I stepped away.

"Don't touch me, asshole," I spit out viciously. I hated waking up to some idiot who thought I was an easy target. Between that and the fact that I hadn't eaten in a couple of days, I was more than a little cranky.

He frowned and stepped closer. I tried to move back, but the car was right behind me. He grabbed my shoulders and pressed me back against it.

"Come on, baby," he slurred. "Give me what I want and I'll give you what you want. Twenty bucks."

I closed my eyes. I was hungry, but I wasn't that hungry. I didn't think I could ever be that hungry. I pushed him back enough to bring my knee up into his balls. He must have been very drunk because it didn't seem to faze him. He hauled back and punched me in the mouth.

That pissed me off. I shoved him hard and backhanded him, sending him flying into another car where he fell to the snow. When he tried to get up, I kicked him in the side,

careful not to hurt him too badly. I wanted him in pain, not dead. He rolled into a ball and I thought seriously about taking his wallet, had even bent down to take it, but my conscience got in the way. I stood, slung my bag on my back, and walked away.

I'd only gone a few feet when a man came around the side of the building to stand directly in my path. I stopped and looked at him, wondering if he were another drunk I'd have to fight off. He was tall, with light brown hair. I ignored the kindness in his eyes mostly because by then I knew eyes could lie. Most of the time what you saw on the surface wasn't the real person underneath. To me he was just another asshole in my way.

He glanced at the drunk on the ground then looked at me coldly. "I'd heard there was a new ghoul in town," he murmured.

"You heard wrong, asshole," I told him angrily. "I'm no fucking ghoul."

"It's written all over your aura," he told me, his voice hard. "Who's your master?"

I took a step toward him, more than ready to fight some more. "I don't have a fucking master," I spat at him. "Leave me the hell alone."

That just seemed to amuse him. "What's the deal, your master not feed you often enough?"

My hand flew before I could think and I hit him in the stomach. He doubled over in pain. "I told you, I'm no fucking ghoul."

He looked up at me, his face peaceful. He said something in a language I didn't understand and reached out to touch me.

I knew what he was trying to do and I didn't like it. This time I hit him in the face. "Don't use your fucking magic on me, warlock," I told him.

He wiped the blood from his lip and looked at me warily. "Calm down," he said softly. "I just want to talk."

"Two things piss me off more than anything, dick-head," I bit out harshly. "Calling me a ghoul and using magic on me. You stop doing those, we might find something to talk about."

"I didn't mean to offend you," he apologized, "but your aura looks like that of a ghoul."

What-the-fuck-ever. "I'm not." And I was getting damned sick of people calling me one.

"Did you escape?" he asked.

I sighed and stepped back, letting some of my anger go. It's hard to stay that pissed when you're not planning on killing something. "A long time ago." It was true enough, I guess. I'd certainly escaped Kate.

"I can help you," he told me softly.

"Help me what?" Not that I needed any help. I was doing just fine on my own, thank you very damned much.

"Get your life back."

What, was he some kind of do-gooder? "Look mister, this *is* my life," I replied simply. By then I knew better than to expect anything else.

"Is this all you want?"

"No," I said sarcastically, throwing my hands wide. "I want a ranch house in the suburbs with a picket fence, a couple of kids, a garage and a dog. Can't you see I'm well on my way?"

"Don't get smart with me," he replied coolly. "I'm trying to help you."

I nodded. "Oh yeah, I've seen that kind of help before," I sneered at him. "Let me help you baby, are you hungry? I got food. Cold? I got blankets. Tired? Just sleep with me and I'll make the big bad world go away.' Fuck that, I'd rather sleep on the street."

"No strings, I swear," he said strongly. "I've got a place down on Fifth Avenue, it's a safe place for special kids." The way he'd said special made me think he meant something other than retards. "Ask around. You change your mind, that's where I'll be. Ask for Glenn Johnson. I'll be waiting for you."

I wanted to laugh in his face, but I didn't. "You gonna move aside or do I move you?" I demanded. He stepped out of my way without another word, but I felt him watching even after I'd turned the corner.

A week or so later a cold front moved in. March in Baltimore can get cold, damned cold. I was thankful I hadn't gone any further north, but still I was having a hard time finding a place to sleep. It seemed like every abandoned house had druggies or vampires in it and I really didn't want to have anything to do with either of them.

The homeless shelters were filled to overflowing and every time I walked into one I felt guilty because I was taking up space that could have gone to someone who needed it more than I did. I tried to get a ride out of town, but I couldn't find anyone to take me who didn't want something in return that I didn't want to give away.

I was huddled around a trash can fire with a couple of other kids when one of them started talking about a certain brownstone where it was rumored they would help you.

"Thing is," the boy told us, "you gotta know how to do shit."

"I know how to do things," another boy said.

"No," the first one replied. "You gotta be able to do weird things, like read people's minds."

"What are you talking about?" I asked quietly.

The boy explained that his cousin had developed some weird abilities like mind reading and moving things without touching them. She'd gone to this brownstone and they'd taught her how to use those abilities before they helped her go to New York.

After that I checked around town and sure enough Glenn Johnson had a reputation for helping special kids who needed help. Sometimes he even approached kids he knew could do things and no one could figure out how he'd found out about it.

It was said that he never expected any kind of payment for his help, which I had a hard time believing. It was my experience that no one ever did something for nothing. The question was, what price did he ask for his help?

I started hanging around the neighborhood the brownstone was in and watching the people who lived there. Everyone looked happy and healthy enough, no one looked forced to be there, but somehow I couldn't bring myself to actually go to the door.

No matter how much I didn't want to be obligated to anyone ever again, hunger and the cold finally drove me to find out exactly what price Glenn would ask for his help. I stood on the sidewalk and looked at the house for a long time before I knocked on the door. When a young Asian woman answered, I asked for Glenn Johnson.

"Yeah," she replied as she stepped back. "I'm Jane, come in. You hungry? I was just making a sandwich."

It sounded really good because I hadn't eaten in a couple of days, but I didn't want to take charity. "No, I'm okay," I told her as she led me into the kitchen.

She picked up a sandwich from the counter and handed it to me. "Let me get Glenn for you," she said before she walked out of the room.

What the hell was I supposed to do with the damn sandwich? I ate it. As I was finishing the last bite I heard movement behind me and spun around.

"I thought you'd be here a long time ago," Glenn said quietly.

"I said you'd be waiting," I reminded him.

"So I was," he murmured. "Did you ask around?"

"Yeah." Everyone had said Glenn was the man if you could do weird things and needed help. That was me in a nutshell.

"You've been watching, too," he said. "Smart girl."

That surprised me, I didn't think anyone had seen me hanging around. "Sometimes," I told him. "Sometimes I listen to the wrong people." I hoped I hadn't done just that in coming here.

"Is that what you think you're doing?" he asked.

I smiled grimly. "We'll find out, won't we?"

HUNTING

HEARTS OF FIRE, STREETS OF STONE

MODERN WARRIORS SADDLE IRON HORSES OF STONE

RIDE THE WIND - POISON

It took me a while to trust him, but eventually I realized that Glenn honestly didn't expect any kind of payment for his help. He and his friends really did want to help the kids who couldn't be helped through normal channels. Doctors have a tendency to put you in a mental hospital if you try to tell them you can read minds, you know?

With Glenn's help I went through a lot of changes in the next few months. He and his friends showed me how to control my temper and find some balance in my life. I went back to working with plants and that helped a lot. There were still plenty of times I struck out in anger, but as the months went by it happened less and less.

I spent most of my time with the people from the brownstone. It wasn't like living with the pack, these people were my friends and my family. That most of them were mages didn't really matter to me. These were the only people I felt I could trust with my life, and I knew they could count on me for the same thing. That was important especially after I started hunting with them, but that didn't happen until a few months later.

They helped me find a job and I got an apartment not too far from the brownstone. Glenn told me that I didn't have to move out, but I knew I did. I didn't want to feel obligated to him or anyone else.

There was a garden behind the house my apartment was in and the landlord told me I could plant whatever I wanted back there, as long as it was legal. I hadn't lost my green thumb and within a few weeks the place was full of flowers.

Carol Lonetree and her kids lived in one of the other apartments, and I took to her kids right away. Bobby was very outgoing and liked to come out and watch me work in the yard. Paul was a lot shyer about spending time with me I think because he'd been born with one leg a lot shorter than the other one. Did I mention that they were all werewolves?

The boys' mother was very bitter mostly because she'd made a bad choice earlier in her life. Werewolves aren't supposed to have kids together because something is always wrong with the babies when they do. They're called Metis, and Paul was one. Carol had been ridiculed for having him and she had left her pack to live in the city. She hated it and spent most of her time drinking.

It wasn't long before I felt like I was the boys' mother, even though I didn't look any older than Paul. People from the brownstone spent a lot of time at my place, and the boys liked every one of them. We all kind of adopted them into the family.

And it was a kind of family. There were things the Lonetree boys and I weren't a part of because we couldn't do magic like they could, but we were involved in just about everything else from cookouts to beach romps. About once a week Glenn would open a portal to a beach somewhere and we'd all go swimming, no matter what the weather was like in Baltimore.

When one of the girls at the brownstone came to me asking about vampires, I wasn't really surprised. Lisa wasn't like the others, she was young and very naïve. She told me that Glenn and the others had talked about hunting vampires, which was news to me.

From what Lisa said a vamp had approached her one night and offered her something Glenn couldn't: immortality. She told me that they'd been exchanging blood and it took all I had not to freak out.

"Lisa, I've seen this before," I told her as calmly as I could manage. "I had a friend, Megan, who was doing the same thing with a vamp. He killed her."

"You're just jealous," she accused. "You miss your master and can't stand to see me happy with a Kindred." She stood up and turned toward the door.

I grabbed her arm and turned her to face me. "Lisa, I've never had a master," I admitted. "I've seen how they treat their ghouls, you have no idea what you're getting into."

She gave me a hard stare and I felt the hair on my arms rise.

"Don't," I whispered, but I couldn't say anything else, the magic wouldn't let me.

"I feel sorry for you," she said softly. "Maybe Ritter can find your master and then you'll be happy again."

I wanted to tell her again that I didn't have a master, that if Kate found me I'd never be happy, but I couldn't say a word. She kissed me on the cheek and left. It took almost an hour for me to break out of the spell she had put on me and when I did I went straight to the brownstone.

Only Glenn and Jared were in the house, and when I told them what had happened they looked at each other like I wasn't there.

"Tell me you're not going after her," I demanded.

The look on Glenn's face was almost amused. "Is that what you want to hear?"

"I want the truth," I told him. "Do you even know who this Ritter is?"

"We know," Jared said calmly. "He's pretty strong, but I think we can take him."

"Take him?" I asked, not believing he could be serious. "If you destroy a vamp you just bring attention to yourself. You'll have a dozen of them after you."

"What are we supposed to do, roll over and play dead?" He ran a hand through his hair and looked at Jared thoughtfully.

"I'm not saying we shouldn't defend ourselves, Glenn," I told him. "I'm just saying that these things are stronger than you realize. They're damned hard to kill, and they keep coming back for more."

"Are you saying we should just look the other way?" he demanded, turning to look at me. "That we should close our eyes and pretend that Lisa's not under their spell right now?"

"Lisa knew the risks," I said sadly. "She went looking for it."

Jared stepped forward. "What?"

"I tried to warn her," I replied, "tried to tell her what she was in for, but it was too late, she didn't care. It was like she was jonesing for the blood. I've seen it before, Glenn," I added, turning to him. "Once that craving hits, there's no stopping it."

"We can't just let them take our people like that," he said softly, dangerously.

"What do we do?" Jared asked.

"Are you both insane?" I demanded. "They are vampires! They'll kill us all and not even remember what we tasted like a minute later!" I'd seen it happen too many times before.

Jared glanced at me. "Glenn, maybe she's right, man. She's had contact with them."

"So have I," he replied in a hard voice. "They are abominations, Jared. We've talked about this."

"Hello," I interrupted. "Reality check, guys. Have either of you ever killed a vamp?"

"I have," Glenn told me. "It's not easy, but it can be done." He grabbed a bag from the couch that I swear hadn't been there a moment ago and started for the door followed by Jared.

"Wait a minute," I called after them. "Just the two of you are going after this thing? Do you even know how strong it is? Are either one of you prepared to deal with Lisa if she tries to protect it?"

That got their attention. They both turned to look at me as if they hadn't thought about that one before.

I shook my head in disgust. "I'm going with you."

"You ever killed a vamp?" Glenn asked as I walked past him out the door.

"A few," I admitted softly. I waited on the sidewalk for them to catch up and I wasn't really surprised when Glenn didn't seem to believe me. He should have.

Ritter was stronger than any of us thought he would be. Of course Lisa got in the way. Jared hesitated and I thought for sure that she was going to kill him with the big knife she had. I pushed him out of the way and took most of the blow on my left arm.

I ignored the pain from the wound and backhanded the girl. She flew back but came after me again. I threw my own knife and she collapsed back against the wall. Between the three of us we managed to get the vamp staked and immobile. Jared and Glenn cut the thing's head off while I checked on the girl.

When the guys were done, they found me sitting on the floor next to Lisa's body, holding her hand. I was tired and cold, and my whole left arm was covered with blood, but I was in better shape than Lisa was. I was alive.

Glenn knelt beside me and wiped the blood away from the gash on my arm with his shirt. He cursed briefly before taking a deep breath and beginning a chant. I didn't have the energy to tell him not to use his magic on me, and a few minutes later the cut was healed as if it had never happened. Too bad he couldn't heal the knife wound in Lisa's chest that had pierced her heart.

"You had to do it," Jared said softly. "She would have killed us."

"We came here to save her," I reminded him.

"We did," Glenn told me solemnly.

Looking at her dead body, I had to agree with him. She wasn't a slave anymore, she was free. That night started the group's serious hunting and I was right there with them. I didn't question the rightness of killing Kindred or their ghouls until many, many years later.

At one point Glenn and a few of the others thought it would be a good idea to try and 'Awaken' me. I'd never thought about it before, and although I'd never had any of the signs they usually looked for in a mage, I agreed to give it a try. Big mistake.

Oh, the ritual went well enough. I dressed in the ceremonial garb and took the required steps they thought were needed to Awaken, but no vision ever touched me. Even when Glenn stepped in to try and help it didn't do any good.

The only thing the experience gave me, besides the headache from hell, was the certainty that I was indeed damned. I won't say that I know a lot about mage society, but I do know they believe you have to Awaken to ascend, and since I'll never Awaken, I'm doomed.

I dated a couple of the guys from the brownstone but never let it get serious. I made it a point not to ever get serious with any guy, it wasn't just them. In fact, I usually walked away as soon as they started to get serious with me, a lesson Glenn learned the hard way.

Yeah, I went out with him too. It wasn't like it had been with Raven, Glenn didn't make me feel like I owed him that way. In fact, I probably wouldn't have dated him at all if I thought he expected it from me. He was a good friend, and it was a very different experience for me to date someone I actually liked.

For real now, I thought he understood that I didn't want to get serious about anyone. Turns out I was wrong. One night we were lying in his room when he decided to tell me how he really felt.

"You know I care a lot about you, Eliza," he whispered as he ran his fingers through my hair. "I could love you if you'd just let me."

I stiffened against his side. "That wouldn't be a good idea, Glenn."

"Why?"

"There's a lot about me you don't know," I told him. I pulled away and he reluctantly let me go. By then he knew exactly how strong I was and that I could easily get away if he tried to hold me.

"Tell me," he urged, his eyes searching my face.

"So not a good idea." I got off the bed and walked over to my clothes. "Look, I think we should stop seeing each other," I said firmly as I started to get dressed.

He sat up. "What?" He was acting like he thought I was joking.

"I'm serious. You know, she could find me at any time, Glenn," I warned him. "The last time she found me, someone I cared a lot about disappeared. I don't want to see that happen to you, it's best if we just stop dating." I pulled my shirt over my head and reached for my socks.

He thought I was talking about my 'master.' "Eliza, we've killed vamps before," he said, trying to be reasonable, "if she comes to town we'll take care of it."

I shook my head, there was no reason involved when it came to Kate. "You don't know what she's like," I told him. "No, I can't see you anymore." I grabbed my shoes and walked out of his room down the hall toward the stairs.

He caught up with me, his pants barely buttoned. "You can't do this," he said, grabbing my arm.

I just looked at him, my face hard, and he dropped his hand. "This is the way it has to be," I told him sadly. I didn't want it to end this way, but what other choice did I have? "If you can't accept that, it's your problem. I've been in Baltimore a lot longer than I planned on anyway."

"Are you saying you're leaving?"

"I'd rather leave than argue about this with you," I said honestly.

"You can't," he repeated.

"Watch me." I turned and started walking again.

He grabbed my arm and turned me around, letting me go as soon as I looked up at him. "No, wait," he said pleadingly. "If you want to break up with me fine, I won't push it, Eliza. But don't leave."

I didn't know what to say. I didn't really want to leave Baltimore, I liked living there. And something told me it wasn't time for me to move on, not yet. But if I agreed, would he really not push it or would we be arguing all the time about dating?

"We need you here," he reminded me. "How can we keep up what we've done with the vamps without you?"

They could do it, and they knew a lot more about killing vamps than they had in the beginning. "You'd manage."

"Come on," he begged. "We need you. I need you. Stay." He seemed very sincere.

"You won't push me?" I asked softly.

"Well, I won't say I'll never ask you out again," he replied with a wry smile, "but I won't give you a hard time about it." When I still hesitated, he raised two fingers. "Scout's honor."

"All right, I'll stay," I said finally. "But I can't promise for how long. I really have been here too long, I can feel it."

He shook his head. "You're just being paranoid."

Was I? Somehow I didn't think so. A part of me said I should leave Baltimore before it was too late, but an even bigger part told me that I'd regret it for the rest of my life if I did. Guess which one I listened to.

MAC BRENNAN

I WOULD SELL MY SOUL FOR SOMETHING PURE AND TRUE
SOMEONE LIKE YOU
NUMBER ONE CRUSH - GARBAGE

No matter how much I liked Baltimore, I had a hard time keeping a job there. The main reason was because despite Glenn's help, anger management for me still meant beating the shit out of anyone who gave me a hard time. I'd lost my job over yet another one of those incidents, and Glenn was able to get me into the Memphis, a seedy little bar near downtown Baltimore. Our group spent a lot of time there, mostly because vampires didn't frequent the place.

One night a few weeks after I started working there, I was waiting tables and almost the whole group from the brownstone was there, sitting near the pool tables. Jane had told me that Glenn would be in a little while later and I was glad to hear it. Even though we weren't seeing each other anymore, we were still friends.

I had just handed out drinks to a table across the room from them when I had the distinct feeling that I was being watched. I straightened slowly to look around and saw him right away, sitting next to Glenn who had come in while I wasn't looking. I hadn't seen the guy before, but somehow I knew him instantly.

He sat almost completely motionless, staring at me with one hand on a beer glass and the other holding a cigarette halfway to his mouth. He looked like perfection walking to me; there's no other way to explain it. His thick dark hair swept away from his ruggedly handsome face, and his eyes caught mine so that I couldn't look away. From what I could see he was solidly built, very muscular.

The lights in the bar seemed to dim until he was the only thing I could see. In the time between one heartbeat and the next I knew he was strong yet gentle, brave and warm. In that moment I knew I could love this man forever.

For that brief instant it didn't matter to me that I was a freak or that Kate could find me any night. My past didn't matter and my blood didn't matter and the fact that my mother was a vampire mattered even less. I knew with every part of me that I was meant for this man and I was so thrilled that I'd finally found what I hadn't even known I was looking for.

The moment was broken when Glenn jostled the newcomer with his elbow. The stranger turned and said something to my friend, then finally brought the cigarette to his mouth. I turned away and took the empty tray back to the bar.

"Shift's up, Eliza," the bartender said loudly to be heard over the crowd and the music.

A glance at the clock told me it was past eleven. I took off my apron and hung it in the kitchen, then grabbed a mug of coffee before I walked over to join my friends.

A few of them called out to me and I greeted them in return as I made my way through the crowd to the table where Glenn sat. There were no seats free, but the stranger reached behind him to grab a chair from another table and move it beside his. I glanced at Glenn, but he didn't notice my hesitation.

"Eliza," he called warmly, "Sit down, have a drink."

"Got one," I said, lifting my coffee mug a little in his direction and sitting down next to the newcomer. I didn't want to get too close to him, but I couldn't explain my reluctance so I had no other choice.

"Hello," the stranger said softly with a slight accent that I couldn't quite place.

"Hi," I replied softly.

"Hey," Glenn called across to me with a boyish grin. "This is Mac Brennan. He's new in town and I thought we all could show him around."

"And you brought him to this dump?" I asked with an answering grin. "Isn't there a better bar you could have taken him to?"

He tried to look wounded and covered his heart. "Hell, I just thought I try one more time to get you to change your mind and take me back."

I rolled my eyes. Glenn had kept his word about not pushing me, but he'd also kept it about asking me out again. I ignored him like I had every time he'd brought up the subject and the conversation at the table resumed around us. I sipped at my coffee and I noticed that Mac was watching me, but I didn't look at him.

A small figure bumped into my chair from behind and suddenly Mac's arms were full of a young boy. It was a little late for Bobby to be out, but there he was. He liked to spend time with the people from the brownstone; they were his friends as much as they were mine.

"Bobby," I chastised him, "what are you doing here this late?" I glanced around but I wasn't surprised when I didn't see his mother. He'd snuck out, again.

"I just came down to see you, Eliza," he said as Mac helped him get back on his feet. Bobby was twelve and almost as tall as I was, but he didn't seem to mind me mothering him.

"Don't you have school tomorrow?" It was nearly midnight.

"Yeah," he admitted reluctantly, and then grinned. "But I saw this cool flower down on Washington and I knew you'd want to see it."

I couldn't help but smile. Bobby knew I liked plants and it seemed like every week he was trying to show me a house that had different things planted in the yard. "You probably wouldn't go home if I told you to, would you?" I said, reaching up to ruffle his blond hair.

"I'll take you there," he offered anxiously. "You could make sure I went home right after."

"All right," I told him, taking a last drink of my coffee. "I'll make sure you get home."

"After you see the flowers?"

"Yeah," I said, rising to my feet. I was actually glad for an excuse to get away from the stranger who affected me so strongly. "After."

It didn't work because he stood up too. "Do you mind if I walked with you?" he asked, earning a sharp look from the boy.

I agreed for two reasons, only one of which I would admit to. One was that Bobby's crush on me had gotten a little too heavy since I'd broken up with Glenn, and him seeing me with another man might make him back off. The other reason, the one I wouldn't have told anyone if it killed me, was that Mac fascinated me.

The three of us said our goodnights and walked out of the bar into the night. Bobby stayed a little ahead of us, preferring to be on what he called point. That way he said he could watch for bad guys and take care of them before they got to me. Normally I found it adorable, but that night I wished he'd stayed back with Mac and me.

"Have you been in Baltimore long?" I asked him to break the silence between us.

"Not really," he replied. "I just got into town a few days ago."

"You're a long way from home," I murmured, finally recognizing the faint Irish brogue in his voice.

He nodded and looked down at me. I looked back, fascinated by his eyes even in the dimness of the streetlights.

"So are you busy tomorrow night?" he asked me.

I wanted to say no so badly that I frowned and looked away. "I think so," I told him firmly.

"You think so? You don't know?"

I shook my head. "Look, Mac," I began, watching Bobby turn the corner up ahead, "you seem like a real nice guy, but I don't want to go out with you." If the vamps decided to retaliate against us for fighting them, anyone close to us would be their first target. Ditto for anyone I cared about if Kate managed to find me again after all this time.

"Why?"

I was saved from answering when I heard a growl from around the corner. "Bobby," I whispered even as I started running. I knew what I'd find before I even reached the corner so I didn't bother to look before turning it. The growl had told me that Bobby had shifted to wolf-man form to fight, and my gut told me it was a vampire. I pulled my knife and prepared to fight.

"Stop!" I yelled loudly.

The tall dark vamp looked up at me over Bobby's shoulder. Bobby took advantage of his distraction and raked the vamp across the chest with his long sharp claws.

The vamp staggered back and lost his grip on the boy, but he recovered quickly. He looked right at me and his eyes widened. He hit Bobby with a well-aimed backhand, and the boy went flying into the street. The vamp growled loudly and I came to a stop, readying myself for the fight of my life. I'd fought vampires before, but not like this. I knew I could probably get away, but that would have left Bobby defenseless and Kindred love shapeshifter blood.

Suddenly the leech froze with a surprised look on his face. Then he fell face down on the ground and I could see a piece of wood sticking out of his back. Where the hell had that come from?

"Good thing someone was tearing down that fence," Mac said from behind me. I spun, having forgotten he was there. He shrugged and put his hands in his pockets. "I saw it and thought I could give you a hand."

I glanced from the body on the ground to Mac's face and realized the obvious; Mac had levitated the wood and thrust it into the vampire's heart with some type of magic.

"Thanks," I told him with a smile. I sheathed my knife and walked over to where Bobby had fallen. He had returned to human form and was just sitting up, holding his head. He was quite naked, but that hadn't really occurred to him yet.

"Are you all right?" I asked him softly, bending down at his side.

"What happened to the vamp?" he asked.

"Mac got him," I said, gesturing toward the body on the sidewalk.

"Really?" He looked up at Mac with admiration in his eyes.

Mac took off his long leather jacket and offered it to Bobby. "It wasn't much," he said softly. "If he hadn't hit you like that I know you would have taken him."

"I would have too," Bobby cried fiercely. "I would have ripped his heart out and eaten it."

"I don't think it would have tasted very good, Bobby," I cautioned him. I knew he had to learn how to defend himself, but I didn't want to see him get killed thinking he knew more about fighting than he did. Damn, now he'd be begging to join us on the hunt. I didn't want

him at risk but there was nothing I could do; Glenn had a policy of never turning away anyone that knew the risks and still wanted to kill vamps.

"Would you like to help me take care of it?" Mac asked him. "After all, it should have been your kill."

I glanced up at Mac as Bobby took the jacket and pulled it on quickly, having suddenly realized that he was naked. I knew Mac must have been around werewolves before to know how to treat the boy without hurting his feelings.

"Sure!" Bobby said enthusiastically. He ran over to the vamp and began poking at the body.

"So when won't you be busy?" Mac asked me.

"Who was he?" I replied, searching his face.

He glanced at Bobby. "My brother."

"But you're not." Last I knew Garou couldn't make things float.

He smiled. "No, I take after my father. How about Saturday?"

I shook my head and laughed. "I like you, Mac," I told him, too much if I was to be honest with myself. "But I won't go out with you. Ever." As I watched him and Bobby decapitate the vampire, I wondered how long I could hold to that promise.

It only took a few days for Mac to become so much a part of my life that it felt like he'd been in it forever. The more I saw of the handsome Irishman, the more I liked him. The more I liked him, the more I told myself that I had to stay as far away from him as possible. Except I couldn't, no matter how hard I tried.

He was always at the brownstone when I was there, and whenever any of the magi came to my apartment he was with them. I don't know if it was chance or if he manipulated it in some way, but every time I turned around he was there.

Bobby was at my place a lot too, and one night when Paul came over, he seemed to connect instantly with Mac in a way that I'd never seen him connect with anyone. That just made me like Mac even more.

By the time two weeks had gone by, I knew I was in love with him. Oh, I tried to deny it, and I sure as hell didn't tell anyone else, but there it was. I did everything I could to avoid him, but it was hard to do unless I wanted to give up my hanging with everyone at the brownstone or leave town.

As easy as it had been for me to leave every other city I'd ever lived in, the thought of leaving Mac and Baltimore made me want to cry. It might have been better for all of us if I'd been able to leave, but for whatever reason I couldn't. Even now, even knowing how it all ended, I find it hard to regret staying. Some things you live with, no matter how much it hurts.

WANTING

DID YOU EVER WANT SOMETHING SO BAD THAT YOU COULD TASTE IT?

DID YOU EVER WANT SOMETHING YOU KNEW YOU COULDN'T HAVE?

I DID - TRISHA YEARWOOD

One afternoon brought up the subject of Mac joining our hunts. Glenn and I were in a fenced in area at the back of my apartment building that I'd pretty much taken over and planted with flowers.

I didn't like Glenn's suggestion that we ask him to join us. "No, I don't want him involved," I said firmly, digging in the dirt at the bottom of the privacy fence that surrounded the little plot.

"He knows something is going on," Glenn protested from a few feet away. He was leaning against the building watching me dig. "Do you think you can keep this from him?"

"Why not?" I asked harshly, rising to my feet aggressively. "How many people have you told about this?"

"I'm not dating any of them," he replied patiently, his arms crossed as if he thought I should be reasonable about this.

Of course I had no intention of being reasonable. Something inside of me died every time I thought of Mac being hurt. "I'm not dating Mac either," I reminded him, not that Mac hadn't been trying. So far I'd been able to turn him down every time he'd asked me out, but I wasn't sure how much longer I could hold out. I thought a lot about leaving town, but I couldn't quite bring myself to do it. "I don't want to see him hurt. We don't need him."

"We need everyone we can get our hands on," he told me firmly, frowning. "Or do you forget exactly what we're fighting?"

"I know better than you do what we're fighting," I replied coolly. I walked away from him a little, thinking of Kate and all of the other vamps I'd seen since I'd run away from home. I turned back to face him. "Or do *you* forget?"

Glenn's face softened and he walked closer to me. "I know you had a hard time of it, Eliza," he said kindly. "But I would think that would make you more eager to kill them all."

He had no idea what I've been through. If he did, somehow I doubted he'd like me as much as he did. Glenn was all about control; he had no idea what it was like in the darkness I spent my life in. In my world there was just pain and hate and nothing I did ever seemed to mean anything.

"I am not eager to get Mac killed," I said. God, even the thought of him dying made me feel queasy. "This is just too dangerous. For real now, how long do you think we're going to survive this, Glenn? These things don't just give up and they don't go away. If you could just wish them dead it would make killing vamps so much easier."

"Maybe someday I'll figure out that trick," Glenn said seriously. "In the mean time we need all the help we can get."

"Not Mac," I repeated furiously.

"Are you fucking him? Is he too good in bed for you to give up?" he asked harshly, frustration plain on his face.

Before I could even think about it, I backhanded him across that face and he fell back against the table. "You think I have to fuck him to care about him?" I demanded, pissed and quite prepared to hit him again.

He lifted his hands palm out to try and calm me down. "Hey, I take it back," he said quickly, almost laughing. He wiped a hand across his mouth and it came away with blood on his fingers. He looked up at me sternly. "Fuck him or kill something, Eliza. You need to get rid of that frustration somewhere."

I lost my hold on my anger; Glenn knew that the easiest way to calm me down without using magic was to go all hard on me. He also knew that I'd be pissed if he tried to use magic on me. I turned away and let the tears fall down my face. When I hugged myself to try and hold it in Glenn was there to comfort me.

"I won't tell him," he whispered softly in my ear. "But you have to know that if he comes to me and wants to join, I can't turn him away."

"I know," I told him. "It's too much to hope he'll never find out when everyone else at the chantry is involved. I just don't want to see him hurt." I hadn't realized until that moment just how much I wanted to keep him safe.

"You finally fell," he murmured. He didn't have to find it that amusing. "I knew something was up when you wouldn't even have coffee with him. I have to say I'm impressed. I thought you were invincible when it came to love, it's good to see that Mac got past that."

That would remain to be seen, wouldn't it? I already knew how dangerous it was for me to care about people. After Eddie disappeared, I'd never allowed myself to care that much for anyone ever again. Never that is, until I'd looked across the Memphis and seen Mac sitting there.

"You don't have to sound so thrilled," I told him irritably. I pulled away and wiped the tears from my face. "It's not like we're getting married or anything like that."

"Why not?" he asked softly. "Would that be so bad?"

I shot him a look that must have showed him how much I really wanted a life with Mac. "I know better," I replied. "I've tried the normal life thing, it doesn't work for me."

"It doesn't work or you won't let it work?" he demanded.

Shaking my head I went back to digging in the dirt. I wasn't about to admit that he might have a point, not even to myself.

FALLING

TAKE ME WHERE THEIR EYES CAN'T FIND US
WITHOUT YOU I MAY AS WELL JUST...
HARD DAY - GEORGE MICHAELS

A week or so after my heart to heart with Glenn about hunting, I walked out of the Memphis at closing time to find the subject of our conversation waiting for me. I stopped for a moment then looked around, reaching out with my senses to make sure there wasn't any vamps nearby. I had to tell myself I wasn't glad we were quite alone.

"Hi, Mac," I said warily, wondering if tonight would be the night I gave in and agreed to go out with him.

"Eliza," he drawled, his voice and light accent playing havoc with my mind. "It's late, mind if I walk you home?"

I looked around again, almost hoping for a vampire to jump out and ruin the romantic mood. "You think I need protecting?"

He smiled. "Would you believe me if I said I did?"

I smiled back, despite myself. "I might."

He held his arm out to me and reluctantly I put my hand in the crook of his elbow. He led me out of the alley and onto the sidewalk.

"Where is everyone tonight?" he asked almost too casually. I wondered if he knew that they were out hunting.

I didn't like lying to him so I stuck to the truth as much as I could. "I'm not sure," I replied, not looking at him. "No one's been in tonight."

Silence filled the air between us as we walked along, but it was a good silence. After a while, he said, "I heard about a restaurant just out of town I thought you might be interested in."

"Oh?" I'm not much for dining out. I didn't really have anything to dress up in, and looking at what Mac usually wore, I figured he probably wanted to go someplace nice.

"Yes, apparently the owner travels quite extensively and brings back different types of orchids from every country he visits," he told me. "He has a wide variety on display in the restaurant."

I looked up at him in surprise. "How—" I was going to ask how he knew I liked flowers, but that would have been giving too much away. "How many?"

"At least a dozen," he replied, a smile playing on his lips. "I thought I could take you for dinner some time."

I knew this was a ploy to get me to go out with him. I frowned up at him. I knew it.

"You do eat, don't you?" he asked.

I looked away. "I eat."

"How does Friday sound? They have a band on weekends. It's a little quieter than the Memphis, though."

"The Memphis is a dive," I reminded him with a smile, looking up into his face. "Riots are quieter on Friday nights." Then I felt it, the prickle at the base of my spine that told me there was a vampire nearby. I stiffened and looked around, searching for its hiding place.

"What's wrong?" Mac asked in a low voice.

I pulled away and stepped back from him, looking toward the house we'd been walking past. A glance at the address told me that this was the house Glenn and the others had planned on visiting tonight. How had I forgotten that we'd walk right by it on the way home? I listened carefully for a moment and heard the faint sounds of struggle coming from inside.

"Damn," I whispered, pulling a stake from behind my back. "Stay here," I told Mac over my shoulder as I ran up the steps. The door wasn't quite closed all the way and I pushed open very slowly until I could slip through the opening. I could hear the fighting much better now, and I slid into the dimness inside as if it were a part of my soul.

A nightlight illuminated the hall and lit my way toward the kitchen where I knew the basement steps would be. I'd just reached the doorway when I heard a noise behind me and spun, stake raised to strike. It was Mac.

"I told you to wait outside," I hissed at him. He just shook his head and pointed toward the stairs.

I heard Jared cry out and I knew that there was no time left for arguments; they needed help down there and they needed it now. I ran down the steps and immediately went for the vamp that was standing over a bleeding Jared. The mage was on the ground next to another body that wasn't moving. I refused to let myself get distracted by worrying who it was and I called out to the thing that was threatening my friend.

It seemed to be confused for a moment and I took advantage of its hesitation to thrust a stake in its heart. It fell to the ground and I turned to look across the room at the other vamp that Glenn and a wolf-man I recognized as Bobby were fighting.

Bobby was doing a good job of keeping the fiend distracted while Glenn worked his magic to paralyze it for the killing blow. Bobby struck and the head rolled to the floor, followed quickly by the limp body of the creature.

I looked down to see that Jared was trying to sit up, but I quickly pushed him back down. "Glenn," I called urgently, putting pressure on a gaping wound on his thigh, "Jared needs you." I'd seen Glenn heal things I would have sworn would kill people, and Jared's leg looked that bad.

Once Glenn was there and started to work on the wound, I looked at the other body. Right away I knew it was Paul, Bobby's brother. He'd been hunting with us almost from the beginning and now he was dead, his blood pooling on the floor of the basement under his body.

I looked up and into Mac's hard eyes. I could feel tears on my cheeks, but Mac's face was dry and cold. Mac and Paul had become close over the last few weeks, and I knew that the pain he must have been feeling had to cut just as deep as mine did. Paul was like a brother to me, but to Mac he was like a son.

Suddenly I heard a deep growl coming from across the room. I looked to see Bobby standing over the body of the vamp staring across the room at the body of his brother. He was going to frenzy; I could see it in his eyes. Damn, I didn't want to have to kill him just so that the rest of us could survive.

Glenn stood up to stop him, but Bobby flung him aside. I grabbed at his arm, but he shrugged and I went flying. I hit the wall hard enough to see stars and for a long moment I was dazed. When I could move again, I looked up to see Bobby standing next to Mac, rage still running through his body.

"You can't revenge him by losing yourself here," I heard Mac whisper to him. "This is not the time or the place. There is no enemy here, Bobby. Save your rage and use it when the time is right."

Bobby threw back his head and screamed, but the danger was over. He fell to his knees and I rushed to take the boy into my arms. The side of my face burned where I hit the wall, but I blew it off; Bobby was far more important than my pain. I heard Mac walk over to where Glenn was getting to his feet.

"I want in," Mac said calmly.

"No," I cried quickly. When Glenn glanced at me, I saw the warning in his eyes. I ignored it. I'd much rather have both of them pissed at me than Mac dead. "Damn it, Glenn, I won't have it." I know that I'd agreed to let him join if he asked, but when it came down to it I couldn't let it happen without a fight.

"This has nothing to do with you," Mac stated calmly without even turning to look at me. "It is not your decision."

"It's dangerous, Mac," Glenn told him seriously. "Paul isn't the first one of us to die hunting these things."

"I know," he replied in the same tone.

I wanted to cry out again, to refuse to let him do this, to beg him to take it back, but a part of me knew it was already too late. He'd made his decision and now he'd live or die by it. I prayed to whatever gods would listen that he wouldn't have to die by it.

"We need every man we can get," Glenn said after a moment, smiling grimly as they shook hands.

Bobby pulled away from my arms and picked up his brother's body. I watched him head for the stairs and saw the vamp that I'd staked, the one that had killed Paul. Time for justice.

I pulled my knife and leaned over to brutally grab it by the hair. I was glad the vamp knew what was going on as I ran the blade across its throat, deliberately taking my time to cut its head off. I almost wished it could fight me, that way I could vent my rage on it even more. In my mind I believed that if it hadn't been for this monster murdering Paul, Mac would never have asked to join us in the hunt. By the time the head was free Glenn had already helped Jared from the basement and Mac and I were alone.

I wished Glenn had stayed, I needed something to calm the beast inside of me. I was terrified of the future; I knew that if Mac hunted with us he could die, just like Paul had died here tonight. Just the thought of his death brought me dangerously close to frenzy myself. I kept my face blank as I cleaned the knife on the dead Kindred's clothing. Mac walked over to me and held his hand out, but I ignored him to put the knife away.

"Come here, Eliza," he says softly.

I looked up at him, still feeling the rage boil inside. Why had he come to Baltimore anyway? Why couldn't he have stayed in Ireland where he'd been safe with his family? A part of me wanted him to go back there, but a stronger, bigger part knew it was too late. I loved him and would always love him, no matter what happened. I didn't know if I could survive without him being a part of my life.

"Now," he added firmly, sounding more than a little like Glenn.

Something about the tone of his voice hit me just right, helped me get the beast under control. Or maybe he used magic on me like he had on Bobby, I don't know. Whatever it was,

I was able to bury my anger and take a deep calming breath. At last I took his hand and let him help me to my feet. To my surprise, he pulled me into his arms.

"I won't die on you, Eliza," he whispered against my hair. "I swear it."

How had he known what I was thinking? Feeling? I pulled back to look up into his eyes and wished I could read his heart. As much as he'd tried to get close to me in the last month, we'd never been this close.

He stared at my mouth for a long moment then lowered his head to kiss me. I raised up on my toes and met him half way. His lips were soft and sweet, just like I'd known they would be. It was definitely magic, but it had nothing to do with his powers.

After a long moment, he pulled back to look down at me with a smile. "Is Friday good?"

I had to laugh; the man had a one-track mind. If we both died tomorrow, I knew my only regret would be not agreeing to go with him. I raised my hand to tuck my hair behind my ear, but his hand was there already doing it for me.

"Friday," I agreed softly. He put his arm around my waist and led me away from the stench of death and into the light.

That same night he took the vows we had all taken when we'd joined the fight: to destroy vampires and their servants whenever possible; to give our own lives to protect the innocent; to destroy a fellow hunter if he or she ever fell beneath the thrall of a vampire, whether they were ghouléd or embraced. It was a vow we all took seriously, and one the group had been called upon to carry through more than once.

For the first time I wondered if I could fulfill the vow if Mac were to fall into the clutches of the vamps. I couldn't picture myself doing anything to destroy him, but if it came down to it, would I? Could I?

Paul's funeral was a few days later. His mother had the viewing at a nearby funeral home, but the body would go to a caern just outside of town. None of the group from the brownstone would be allowed to go with the body mostly because most Garou don't trust mages to be around their caerns. When Bobby came over to my apartment afterward Mac and I sat and talked to him well into the night.

Friday came way too soon to suit me. I'd borrowed a dress from Jane, but I felt wicked uncomfortable wearing it. The restaurant was quiet and nice but not as exclusive as I'd expected it to be.

A small brass band played softly in a corner of the room, and there were candles on all of the tables. Photographs and paintings of orchids lined the walls, and real orchids were everywhere. The air was warm and humid to keep the orchids alive.

Mac ordered wine from the waitress and sat back to look at me while I looked at a brochure that told all about the orchids in the room and the owner's travels.

"How's your face?" he asked me.

I looked up, confused. When he gestured toward my cheek, I covered it with my hand. "Well, I heal quickly," I told him, trying to dismiss the subject. How could I explain to him why I healed faster than your average mortal did? "What are you going to eat?"

We discussed the menu for a few minutes and when the waitress returned with the wine that he ordered both of us. To my surprise, the wine was quite good. We talked a little about Paul while we waited for our dinner. It felt strange to be going on with our lives so soon after his had ended. Paul had known the risks, but it was ironic he was killed on the first hunt Glenn had let Bobby go on.

"If I hadn't had to work, I would have been with them," I whispered. "Things might have been different." Paul would still be alive.

"You shouldn't think that way," Mac told me, reaching across the table to put his hand on mine. "You might have been the one killed."

I smiled wryly, mumbling something about poetic justice that I hoped he didn't hear. At that moment the waitress brought our food.

We talked about orchids, and plants, and places we'd been. When he started talking about Ireland he made it come alive for me. I wished I could go there and see everything he described. His family sounded very nice, very close. I wondered why he'd left them.

"I'm sorry," he said after a while. "I didn't mean to go on like that."

"No," I said honestly, "I like to hear you describe it. It almost makes me feel like I'm there, like I know those people. You must miss it very much."

"I do," he admitted softly. He looked away distractedly.

"Why did you leave?" I asked quietly.

He focused on me again. "Ah, it's complicated."

It was obvious he didn't want to tell me. "I'm sorry," I said quickly. "I didn't mean to pry."

"No, that's okay," he replied. "If you don't mind if I pry. What brought you to Baltimore? Have you lived here long?"

I didn't like him asking about my past, there were too many things there that would drive him away. "I've been here about a year," I said reluctantly. "And Greyhound brought me. How did you know I liked plants?"

"Bobby." He looked at me closely as if trying to figure out what I was hiding. "Why don't you want me to help you and the others hunt?"

I looked away and bit my tongue before I said something I regretted. It wouldn't do for him to know just how much I cared about him. "People die doing what we do. Like Paul did. I don't want to see you get hurt, or worse."

"But it's okay if Glenn gets hurt."

I sighed and shook my head. "I don't want to see anyone hurt. These things are stronger than you realize Mac. They're dangerous. They're hard to kill, and won't stop until they're dead or you're dead."

"We took care of them easily enough," he told me.

"If you call Paul's death easy," I shot back. "And we don't know who they were, we may get payback from killing them."

"How do you know so much about vampires, Eliza?" he asked.

What had he heard about me? Could he see the color of my aura that marked the Kindred blood inside of me? I looked away, unable to meet his eyes. "I'd rather not talk about it," I said coldly. "I know how to kill them. That's all you need to know."

"Why do you kill them?"

Why couldn't he leave it alone? "My life before I came to Baltimore is not open for discussion," I told him as calmly as I could. "If you want to talk about vampires, find someone else to date. If you want me to go out with you Mac, talk about something else."

He nodded, but somehow I thought he wouldn't let this topic rest for long.

To my surprise, Glenn and Jane began dating around the same time I agreed to go out with Mac. He still teased me once in a while about giving him a second chance, but he did it less and less as his relationship with Jane progressed.

Mac and I started spending time away from the rest of the group, and it was better than I ever imagined it would be. We took long walks in the city's streets and talked for hours about everything. Everything except my past, that is. I made sure he knew that it was off limits, but I did tell him a few things that had happened to me.

Our mutual fascination soon became a joke with the rest of our friends. Not in a mean way, of course, but they took to making comments about it whenever they caught us staring. One afternoon Glenn had taken everyone to a beautiful beach in the middle of God knows where. It was very charming, the lake lay in a lush valley with tall snow capped mountains all around us, and while there was a crowd of people swimming and on the beach, it wasn't over crowded.

I picked up a blanket and had started to lay it out when I saw Mac take off his shirt. The sight of his muscles and his skin was enough to take my breath away. When he turned and caught me staring, I blushed and looked away.

"Let's get in the water," Glenn said with a smile. "She can stare anytime, right now we're burning daylight."

With a backward glance at me, Mac followed Glenn toward the water. I watched until Jane sat down next to me.

"He is handsome," she said softly.

I glanced at her. "He is."

"Are you going to watch him all day or are we going to go swim?" she asked.

I smiled. "Let's go." I took off my tee shirt and followed Jane down to the beach. We waded over to where Glenn and Mac were swimming, and within a few minutes Jane and Glenn had moved off, leaving me alone with Mac.

Because we hadn't been dating very long, I still wasn't very comfortable being around him, especially in a bikini. I had a few scars that didn't leave me the prettiest girl on the beach, but he didn't seem to mind. We talked and swam and played like kids in the sunshine. Somehow I ended up breathless in his arms and I know he would have kissed me if Bobby hadn't splashed us right at that moment.

"Save the show for somewhere else," he laughed as he moved away.

Mac and I laughed too. We walked out of the water hand in hand and laid down on the blanket I'd spread earlier. The beach was crowded and noisy, but we fell into a comfortable silence. I was a little sore from the last time we'd gone hunting, and the sun felt good, warming my muscles. It wasn't very long before I fell asleep.

My dreams were filled with Mac, with the two of us living together with a little girl I knew was ours. She looked at Mac as if he'd made the world, and he looked back at her adoringly. I watched them play in the backyard while the afternoon sun beat down on us, warming us. I felt such contentment in the dream, a rightness knowing that all of this was meant to be.

I woke some time later knowing instantly that Mac was there and that he was watching me. I opened my eyes to look at him and saw the intensity on his face. I would have been pissed if he was any other man, but seeing that look on his face made me feel warm and fuzzy. I smiled and reached out to take his hand.

"What were you dreaming about, Eliza?" he asked softly.

"You," I told him honestly.

He seemed a little surprised, but before he could ask me about it, Glenn and Jane walked up.

"Time to go," Glenn said softly.

For the first time I noticed that the shadows had grown and that the sun was going down. We dressed and packed up our things then walked into the woods where Glenn made us a gateway back to the brownstone.

The people at the brownstone usually went to a shooting range on Saturday afternoons. I never went with them, mostly because I couldn't shoot the broad side of a barn. Mac was surprised to hear that, and he was very insistent that I learned how. He didn't seem to think I could defend myself and I didn't bother to remind him that I'd been taking care of myself for a long time.

He talked me into going with the others to the shooting range one Saturday. He was good with a pistol, he'd hit the target quite easily, but I didn't think I would ever be able to match his skill. Or even hit the target at all, for that matter.

"You can do this," he told me encouragingly as he held the gun out to me. "Don't be intimidated it, just hold it firmly, point at the target, and squeeze the trigger."

"Mac, I can't shoot," I protested as I took the gun from him. "I'm telling you, people have tried to show me before and given up in disgust."

He smiled as if he couldn't believe I could be that bad. "Give it a try," he said, standing behind me and helping me aim toward the paper target ten feet away.

I stood stiffly with my arm extended, ready for the recoil. I squeezed the trigger like he'd told me to, but never even hit the paper. I looked at him without saying 'I told you so.'

"Try again." He put his hand on my wrist in an effort to help me aim, but again my bullet never touched the target.

Twenty minutes and a box of shells later, he threw up his hands in defeat. "I can't believe that you never once got the target," he said with a smile, obviously not wanting to hurt my feelings.

I smiled and shook my head. "I told you I can't shoot a gun."

"Eliza," he said haltingly, "don't you think it would be better if you didn't come with us tonight?" It would be the first hunt the group had gone on since he'd joined us.

I shot him an amused look. It was pretty obvious he thought I'd be a shooting duck for the black hats when we joined the others to go hunting that night. "What, you think I can't take care of myself?" I demanded.

"I didn't say that," he protested.

"But you think it," I replied. "Look, I said I can't shoot a gun, Mac. I never said I was defenseless." I pulled a stake and held it near the pointed end.

"Is that a stake?" he asked, puzzled.

I don't think he knew before that moment that I always carried at least one stake with me everywhere. Most of the time I had two stakes, and a knife. I also didn't think he'd seen where I'd pulled it from, and that made me smile. "Yeah, a stake. We are expecting trouble from vamps, aren't we?" I threw the stake at the paper target, and immediately pulled another that followed the first very closely.

"I think I can hold my own," I told him smugly, gesturing for him to look at the target.

He turned to look and saw that both pieces of wood were in the center area of the target. I pulled the knife from my boot and threw it too. It landed between the two stakes.

"Of course, sometimes you need more than a piece of wood," I added, walking toward the target to retrieve my weapons. I examined the stakes and sharpened one with the knife a little before putting them away. Then I sheathed the knife in my boot and smiled at Cormac.

"Where did you pick that up?" he asked me as I walked back to him.

"There was a biker in Atlanta that had a thing for knives," I replied, sliding my arm around his waist. "I learned a few things. Maybe I could show you, that way you wouldn't be helpless without your gun."

He laughed and took me into his arms for a kiss. He gave up teaching me to shoot a gun, but he talked me into teaching him how to throw. He picked it up pretty easily, and he wasn't as good as I was, but that was okay. I'd be there to protect him if he needed it.

DAISIES

SO THIS IS HOW IT FEELS TO BREATHE IN THE SUMMER AIR
THE FEEL THE SAND BETWEEN MY TOES AND LOVE INSIDE MY EAR
CONTROL - POE

A month after Mac and I started dating, we went with Glenn and Jane to her family's cabin in the Smoky Mountains. Jane's family was pretty well off, so the cabin was more like a house than anything else. Glenn and Jane slept together, but she made sure Mac and I had separate rooms. Not that I didn't want to sleep with him, it was just that we hadn't. Yet.

We spent the first day in Asheville touring the Biltmore Estate. It was hard for me to comprehend that someone had actually had the money to build the place, but everyone else seemed to take it as a matter of course.

That night I couldn't sleep. I kept thinking about Mac lying in the room next to mine and what it would be like when we made love. When, not if. I'd been thinking about that one for a while, actually.

Quick on the heels of that thought was the memory of the dream I'd had, the little girl who had looked up at Mac so trustingly. I shook my head to clear it; dreams weren't reality, real life never turned out that happy.

Very quietly I made my way out of the cabin and into the trees that surrounded it. Night made the landscape seem strange, almost otherworldly. I hadn't spent that much time in the woods at night since I'd left the pack in Lynchburg, but I'd learned a thing or two when I was with them.

I wasn't really worried about our safety, but I was restless and it felt good to be moving. My eyes adjusted quickly to the darkness and I explored the area around the cabin. I could hear nocturnal animals moving around out there, and once I thought I saw a wolf sliding through the shadows.

After about an hour of wandering, I walked out of the woods and into a meadow. The moonlight shone down on the flowers that filled the clearing and made them look dazzling. I wanted to see what they looked like in the sunlight. I wanted Mac to see what they looked like in the sunlight.

Then it occurred to me that this would be the perfect place for us to make love. The trees hid the rest of the world from view and the meadow was remote enough that no one would stumble across it while we were occupied. I decided to bring Mac here and let nature take its course.

That decision seemed to take care of my restlessness and for the first time I realized that I was tired. About a hundred yards from the meadow I found a stone path that led back to the cabin. I snuck back to my room and went to sleep, although not for long. I was up before the sun.

I was standing on the deck looking out at the mountains when Mac got up. I loved the view, you could see for miles. The sun would be rising soon, and the chill of the mountain felt great after the heat of the city.

I was drinking tea and wondering if I had the nerve to go through with my plan when he came out onto the deck. Just knowing he was that close to me made me relax in ways I never thought I could before.

"Would you like to go for a walk, Mac?" I asked softly, turning to smile at him. I put the cup down on the rail and picked up a cloth bag without waiting for his answer. When he agreed, I held out my hand and he took it. I wondered if he had any idea what I had planned as I led him down a set of stairs and onto the stone path that meandered through the trees.

A few minutes later we emerged into the meadow. It was even more beautiful than it had been the night before. From this place it was hard to believe that civilization even existed. There were a lot of wildflowers all around us, but most of them were daisies. I bent to smell one, then smiled up at Mac.

He pulled me into his arms and kissed me. The world faded away and I felt a rightness about being in his arms that I'd never felt before in my life. After several minutes I pulled away and led him toward the middle of the field where I took the blanket from the bag and spread it out on the ground. In that meadow, surrounded by daisies, we made love for the first time.

When it is over and we had come back to earth, I snuggled against his side. Birds were singing in the trees and the morning sun felt warm on my skin.

"I used to think places like this couldn't possibly exist," I whispered, thinking about the cities I had grown up in. "I only knew the city and darkness. I found this meadow last night when I went for a walk and I wanted to share it with you, Mac. I wanted this place to be special for both of us forever."

"It is," he replied softly.

"I'll never forget the mountain, or these flowers," I said as I reached out for a daisy that bent close to where we were laying and caressed the petals softly.

"You'll never have to," he told me, placing a light kiss on my forehead. "I'll make sure you always have daisies to remember this day by."

I smiled and snuggled against him. It was easy to believe that nothing bad would ever touch us, that we'd have the rest of our lives together in peace and happiness. I found myself wondering what it would be like to have the child I'd dreamed about, to watch her grow up, maybe even see my grandchildren some day.

"What?" he asked softly.

I glanced up at him. "Just thinking," I told him.

"About what?"

"The future," I admitted. "I never really thought about it before."

"Am I there?" he asked.

"If you want to be." I wanted him to be, but I still wasn't sure just how much he cared about me. I sure as hell didn't want to push him away by coming on too strong.

"I do," he said simply and I believed him.

We spent three more days at the cabin and the others were quick to notice that we were only using one bedroom. Jane took me aside and asked me how things went, but Glenn just watched me with eyes I couldn't read and didn't say a word.

On our last night there, we began to talk of vampires, exchanging first contact stories. Jane told of the vamp who had approached her five years before. He'd admired her magic and wanted to embrace her. Of course, she'd refused.

Then Glenn told us how he'd seen the Kindred come for his mother. "She'd been quiet for a week or so before they came," he said quietly. "I think she knew they were coming, she knew they were going to kill her."

"If she knew, why didn't she do something to stop it?" Mac asked. "Why didn't she tell you?"

Glenn looked at him thoughtfully. "My mother knew that there is no way to avoid fate," he answered sadly. "It was her destiny to speak of the future until the undead came to take her life. The day it happened she asked me to avenge her."

"Destiny?" Mac said doubtfully. "I'm not sure I believe in it."

"It is not necessary for you to believe in it, Mac," Glenn replied with a wry smile. "Destiny believes in you."

I didn't understand what they were talking about, but it was wicked obvious that they weren't going to share with me. There was a lot about their lives I just didn't understand, and this was one of the many things they never offered to explain.

"When did you first see a vampire?" Jane asked me.

Looking away, I tried to think quickly. I knew that both Mac and Glenn would recognize a lie if I tried to tell one, so I had to stay as close to the truth as possible without being completely honest. "There was a woman who was a friend of the family," I told them. "She was a vampire, although I didn't know it at first."

"If she was a friend of the family, why do you hate vampires now?" Mac asked.

I looked at him and tried not to feel trapped. "She didn't ask about the worst vamp I knew, just the first," I said sharply. "When was the first time you saw a vamp?"

His look told me that the subject was far from closed. "I watched my uncle kill one in Galway when I was a teenager. He said that they were abominations in Gaia's eyes and that we needed to destroy them or they would destroy us."

"They like to embrace magi," Glenn commented. "Those among them that use magic do, anyway. Remember the Hermetic Order?"

"The what?" I asked, but they ignored me.

"I hear the Avatar shreds when a mage is embraced," Jane whispered. "I wouldn't want to survive that."

What the fuck was an Avatar?

"The Avatar is what allows us to do what we do," Mac explained softly when he saw the confusion on my face. "Without it we would never have Awakened." He looked at me thoughtfully, but I knew what he was thinking.

"Don't go there," I warned him.

"We tried it," Glenn told him.

"It didn't work?" Mac asked, surprised.

"Gave me the mother of all headaches and I was sick for a week," I said dryly, "but no go."

"Did you try—?"

"Yes," Glenn cut in. "We tried everything. No go."

Thankfully, Jane changed the subject and after we'd talked for another hour or so we all went to bed. The next morning Mac and I went back to the meadow where we stood hand in hand in the sunshine. He tucked one of the flowers behind my ear and kissed me before we went back to the cabin.

When I got home, I pressed the daisy in a photo album. I'd never kept pictures before, never had a reason to, but something had made me buy the album just the week before. For the first time in my life I had something I actually wanted to remember.

It wasn't long before Mac started spending more time at my apartment than at the brownstone. I didn't mind even though my apartment was pretty small and sometimes it felt crowded. I'd watch him read his books by candlelight and hope that this would last forever. Not that I had any doubts about the way I felt, but I wondered just what would happen if he found out the truth about Kate.

He'd never once asked me about my aura or my supposed master, and for that I was grateful. He did ask me about my past though, and I told him some things about the bikers in Atlanta, and the wolf pack in Lynchburg. I just kept it all vague, and I sure as hell didn't tell him about Kate.

Mac and I grew closer the more time we spent together. That's not to say we didn't argue, we did, often. It just didn't interfere with our love. We argued about a lot of different things, but usually it involved my past or his safety.

He didn't seem to think I should be hunting with Glenn and the others, and for real now, I didn't want him doing it. I know we were just concerned about one of us being hurt, but we both thought the other one would be the one injured.

And he wanted to know everything that had ever happened to me. How could I tell him that? How could I tell him the truth about what I really was and expect him to still love me, still want to be with me? I couldn't. I didn't.

I avoided out right lying to him, but I danced around the truth so often that I got tired of it. I told him my father was dead, which was the truth as far as I knew it. I told him that I'd grown up in a lot of different cities and that I'd run away when I was seventeen. What I didn't say was that had been ten years ago.

And what did he really need to know about my past anyway? I was who I was and no stories of where I'd come from would change that. If he couldn't accept me for what I was when I was with him, then he just plain couldn't accept me.

I hated arguing with him, but of course there were advantages to it. It made the making up a lot of fun. So we'd fight and we'd make up and every day I thanked whatever powers were out there that I'd found him.

FRIENDS

WEREN'T WE SOMETHING BACK THEN?

THICK AS THIEVES

WHERE ARE YOU NOW - TRISHA YEARWOOD

Glenn, Jane, Mac and I spent a lot of time together over the next few months. Glenn still teased me about giving him another chance, but I really think he was happy with Jane. Not that it mattered if he wasn't because to tell you the truth no man existed for me but Mac.

One night the four of us had been sitting at my apartment drinking a bottle of wine that Mac had brought with him. The night before had been an unusually difficult hunt, and we really needed a break. We talked and laughed and drank our wine until we were all feeling fine, some of us more so than others. Mac didn't seem too affected, and I never drank too much, but Jane was definitely plastered.

I don't know whose idea it was, but someone suggested that we should all get tattoos. Everyone else quickly agreed, and Jane called around until she found a place that was open at ten o'clock at night. We decided that it was better to walk than to try and drive, and it really didn't take that long for us to get there.

The place was called Tattoo Dreams, and it was in an older building that was just starting to get run down. There was a large mural painted across the storefront that was full of mythical creatures like dragons and unicorns. I loved it on sight.

We went inside and the owner must have been used to rowdy people coming in because he was very patient with us. Glenn and Mac knew what they wanted right away. Mac wanted a Celtic design on his upper chest and I couldn't take my eyes from his skin while the artist was drawing it on.

Glenn chose to have a Superman symbol on his upper arm. He'd told me once that hunting vampires made him feel like Clark Kent, avenging the wrongs vamps did to every day people. Jane studied the wall of designs and finally chose to have a rose imprinted on her ankle. I didn't know what I wanted, but Mac helped me pick out a tribal design to wear as an armband.

As we left Tattoo Dreams, Jane stumbled against Mac. He caught her easily and she laughed. He steadied her a little before passing her over to Glenn who threw his arm around her shoulders. Glenn's new tattoo showed clearly in the streetlight.

I put my arms around Mac's waist and he draped an arm around my shoulders, being careful not to touch my bicep.

"How's your arm?" he asked.

I smiled and turned a little to show him. "A little sore," I admitted softly. "It'll heal. How's your chest?"

"Fine," he replied with a grin.

"Well, no one told me that it would hurt that bad," Jane mumbled good-naturedly.

Glenn kissed her cheek. "Yeah, but if you want the rose, you have to deal with the thorns."

"This was a good idea," I said softly, smiling up at Mac.

"It's been a good night," he agreed, pulling me close against his side.

Jane let Glenn lead her back to the brownstone, but Mac came up to my apartment with me. We turned out the lights almost right away, but it was a long time before we fell asleep in each other's arms.

The four of us were at my apartment a few weeks later when Jane brought up the subject of Lisa. I didn't like remembering so I got up to get more popcorn.

"Who's Lisa?" Mac asked, watching me.

"She used to live with us at the brownstone," Jane said finally when neither Glenn nor I answered. I knew Glenn had told her Lisa was dead, but I wasn't sure he'd told her how she'd died.

"What happened to her?"

I froze in the act of pouring the popcorn into a large bowl and glanced at Glenn. He looked away but didn't say anything. I finished filling the bowl and walked back to the couch.

"What happened?" Mac repeated softly, looking at me.

I didn't meet his eyes as I sat back down next to him. "I killed her."

He seemed surprised. "Why?"

Glenn took pity on me. "She fell in with a vamp," he explained. "When she tried to kill us, Eliza took care of it."

"I knew she'd been ghouled, but I didn't know that," Jane whispered. "I'm sorry, Eliza."

I tried to smile. "She wouldn't listen when I told her I'd seen a vamp kill his own ghoul," I told her softly. "She was so naive, we didn't think she'd last for long."

"Lisa attacked Jared and Eliza put herself in the way," Glenn added sadly. "Lisa took a big slice out of her arm and just kept coming."

"When did you see a vampire kill his ghoul?" Mac asked me.

"In Richmond," I told him in a low voice. "Just before I came here. She got hooked by this vamp, by his blood. She wouldn't listen to me when I tried to tell her it was bad news. He killed her. I killed him."

From the corner of my eye I saw Glenn looking at me broodingly. I'd never told him any of that, and he seemed surprised that I was telling it to Mac now.

"That wasn't so hard, was it?" Mac asked, putting an arm around my shoulders.

I knew he meant me talking about my past and I stared at him irritably. I was glad when Jane changed the subject.

As the weeks passed the Memphis kept getting rougher. Times were hard and when people are out of work, they tend to drink to forget their troubles. When people get drunk, they tend to get mean. When they get mean with me, I fight back. It's kind of a reflex.

Most of the time the owner didn't mind me defending myself, but I have to agree that I pushed it once too often. One night some guy came in who'd had way too much to drink and when he tried to get a little warm and fuzzy with me, I turned him down. When he got nasty, I tried to walk away. Then he got mean. I fought back and broke his nose.

Thankfully Mac wasn't in the Memphis that night. I was upset so I went home instead of going to the brownstone like I'd told him I would and about a half-hour later he was knocking on the door. At first I just wanted him to leave me alone, but he wouldn't leave. I ended up

throwing a stake at him to try and make him go, but he just ordered me to come to him and I did.

Just being in his arms made me feel better. He made me laugh and told me it would be better in the morning. He told me I should find someplace to work that didn't have so many difficult people coming in, a restaurant maybe. I found a job at a diner a few weeks later and he was right, I did like it much better.

The only thing was that it didn't pay as much as the Memphis had, and I was struggling to make ends meet. Jane offered to 'arrange' for me to win the lottery, but I turned her down. I didn't want to owe anyone, not even my best friend.

Glenn told me I could move back into the brownstone if I wanted, but I liked the privacy of my apartment, especially when Mac and I were alone. I was glad that Mac never offered to give me money or 'help' me, but it was getting hard for me to keep my apartment.

One day Mac talked Glenn into taking him home to get his motorcycle. Mac could make a gateway big enough to get small things or himself through, but he hadn't quite mastered the trick of sending more than that to a far off place. Glenn had.

I was a little upset that he hadn't asked me to go with them, but I didn't let him know that. Since I hadn't exactly been sharing things about my past, I figured he was trying to show me how it felt. I didn't like it, it hurt, but I couldn't risk telling him the truth.

A week or so after he got back he started talking about going to Galway in April and taking me with him. I was happy he wanted me to go but I wasn't sure I liked the idea. I said I'd go because he asked me to, but I was afraid. I'd never met a guy's parents before, how was I supposed to act? Would they like me?

The trip seemed to have changed Glenn somehow, almost as if it had given him something to think about that he didn't like. He was a lot more loving with Jane, but she didn't seem to notice. I did, though. Sometimes I caught him looking off into the distance like he had this big weight on his mind. He didn't offer to tell me what was bothering him and I didn't ask. Maybe I should have, maybe things would have turned out different.

And anyway I soon had other things to think about than Glenn's odd behavior. Mac asked me to move in with him. I didn't even think about saying no, which was pretty surprising, all things considered.

MOTHER

ALL THOSE THINGS THAT YOU TAUGHT ME TO FEAR
I'VE GOT THEM IN MY GARDEN NOW
AND YOU'RE NOT WELCOME HERE
CONTROL - POE

I felt the vamp coming before I saw her walk in. She looked at me across the room and my heart froze. How had she found me? For a moment I felt like the young girl who had run into the night and hid in the park from the vampire in her house. Then I remembered that I'd destroyed a lot of vamps over the last ten years and my fear turned into anger.

We moved without speaking across the restaurant to the booths by the window, but what I really wanted to do was scream at her. How dare she come around when I finally had a chance at a normal life?

"What is it you want, Kate?" I asked harshly after we sat down.

She winced at me using her name. She'd never liked me to do that, but then I'd never liked that she was a vampire. Some things you lived with.

"Isn't it enough for me to be concerned about your welfare?" she replied smoothly.

I shook my head. "I haven't seen you in ten years," I reminded her. "I think we're a little past that, don't you?" It was a bit late for her to start playing mom.

"If we haven't seen each other it's only because you've been hiding from me," she murmured.

"Apparently not good enough," I bit out acidly.

"How have you been?" she asked as if she cared. "Is it true that you've found a lover?"

"How dare you walk back into my life and think you have any right to intrude on my personal affairs?" I demanded. "Just tell me what you want, Kate, and get the hell out of my life."

"Eliza, dear," she said softly, "I've missed you. I only want to make sure that you have been safe these last few years." She was almost convincing. Almost.

"I'm alive," I told her bluntly. "That's all you need to know."

"Please," she whispered, putting a hand on mine, "I am your mother. Doesn't that count for anything?"

Now she was admitting she was my mother. I wondered what she wanted as I pulled away from her and wiped my hand on my pants. I knew her condition wasn't catching, but I just hated to feel her cold flesh on mine.

"Just because you brought me into this world doesn't give you any rights over my life," I told her in a fierce undertone. "I didn't ask to be what I am, and you know how I feel about it, how I've always felt about it."

Although my words were harsh, inside I fought with the fear that threatened to overwhelm me. If Mac knew what kind of a freak I was, that I was a half-breed with Kindred blood running in my veins, he would leave me. If I lost him, I had nothing left to live for. Yes, I knew that living for a man was pathetic, but it was true. Mac Brennan was my life, my very existence.

"Eliza please," she pleaded. "Isn't there some part of your heart—" She broke off and looked up from the table.

"Is there a problem ladies?" I heard Mac ask, and turned to see him standing next to the booth. He laid a hand on my shoulder and studied Kate closely. I knew he was ready for trouble, but that was the last thing I wanted here. I couldn't afford to get fired from another job.

Kate looked up at him, obviously offended at his intrusion. "There is now," she said coldly, having no idea that he was to me. Her eyes glittered dangerously. "Do you mind?"

I forced myself to calm down and laid my hand over Mac's. "There is no need, Kate," I told her coolly. "Nothing has changed, we still don't have anything to say to each other."

My mother glanced up at Mac, then searched my face for a long moment. I could tell she'd put together just who the man at my side was when she said, "If that is what you wish, my dear. You know I could never deny you anything."

I couldn't stop myself from stiffening at her words, or replying. "Anything except what you could never give me," I bit out, unable to keep the pain and anger from my voice. All I'd ever wanted was to be normal and no one could do that for me. "Now I just want you to leave me alone."

I stood up and Mac moved back, careful to stay between Kate and me. "She'll be leaving now," I told him. "She doesn't have much time, and I have to get back to work. Could you wait for me at my apartment? I'll be done here soon." I was afraid that he would confront Kate, and that she would tell him the truth before I had a chance to. I knew now that I did have to tell him everything, but this wasn't the time or the place for it.

He smiled in understanding and kissed my cheek as Kate stood up. I wanted to say something more to him, but I had to get back to work. I glanced at Kate and turned to go into the kitchen. I didn't look back; if he learned the truth from Kate then he did. I fought to keep control, completely believing that when Mac found out that Kate was my mother and that I was half vampire, he would leave me for sure.

I finished the rest of my shift in a daze. While I walked the few blocks to the building I lived in, a part of me was already mourning Mac, and another part was trying to figure out what city I'd go to next. I couldn't stay in Baltimore, not without Mac.

He was leaning against the wall in my apartment when I came in. The morning sun streamed across the room toward him, and I wanted so badly to kiss him. Instead I threw my keys on a small table by the door and looked at him warily. I almost expected him to dump me right away, but he surprised me.

"What is going on, Eliza?" he asked.

"Nothing," I replied softly, walking over to the kitchen area of the economy apartment. I was trying very hard to stay calm, but not doing a very good job of it. I kept thinking that the next thing he said would be goodbye.

"Do not tell me that," he said grimly. "I know there is something."

"My life before I met you is not a topic of conversation," I warned him. It wasn't the first time I'd told him that.

"That woman told me to ask you about your family, Eliza," he told me. "She said something about fears that you have about our children. What was she talking about?"

"That bitch!" I murmured under my breath. I started to pace restlessly, waiting for the axe to fall. How much longer was he going to draw this out? Or had Kate not told him the truth?

"Is she the master you escaped from?" he asked slowly.

His calm combined with his last statement snapped my temper. A stake found its way into my hand and streaked across the room to embed in the wall a foot from his head. He straightened and said in a hard voice, "Come here, Eliza."

"No," I shot at him, my eyes flashing with anger, another stake in my hand.

"Now," he told me sternly.

The fight seemed to drain from my body. Either he didn't know what I was or he didn't care. Either way he wasn't leaving just yet. I dropped the stake on the floor and slowly crossed the room to stand in front of him. He took me in his arms and held me close to his heart.

"Now that you have thrown the prerequisite stake, luv," he said in an amused voice, "tell me about it."

That was when I would normally laugh and tell him exactly what was bothering me. I guess I shouldn't have been surprised when I burst into tears instead. I clutched the front of his shirt and stood very stiffly in his arms, fighting my tears with everything I had, but I just wasn't strong enough.

"Who is this woman?" he asked me when I'd finally calmed down. "Why does she make you afraid for me?"

"I don't want to hurt you, Mac," I whispered, putting one arm around his waist slowly and waiting for him to reject my movement. "I'm afraid that you will be when you find out who she is, or that you'll try to do something to her and she'll kill you."

"Who is she?" he asked again.

"She's my mother," I admitted very softly.

"Was she embraced after you were born?" he inquired softly, his voice calm.

"That's usually what happens," I replied evasively.

"But not in this case?" he prompted.

I clutched him tightly for a moment, then forced myself to step away from him. Being that close to him made it hard for me to tell him the truth, and the truth was all I could give him now. I knew I couldn't be with him without telling him what I really was, even if that meant losing him forever. I walked to the window and stared out into the parking lot behind the building. My every movement was stiff and slow, and I honestly expected him to walk out on me before I was done.

"Some kids are afraid of the imaginary monster under the bed," I began softly. I heard him walk a few steps closer to me. "I feared the very real monsters I lived with."

It was hard, but I did tell him the truth about Linda and Kate. He was the first person I ever told the story to and it was harder than I expected. There were things I didn't tell him about, Derrick Matthews, Raven-runs-the-night. There was no need for him to know and it was too hard for me to talk about it, even now, years later. By the time I got to the part about coming to Baltimore, there were tears streaming down my face.

I stopped long enough to glance over my shoulder at him, but his face was carefully blank. I turned back to the window and told him about meeting Glenn without mentioning his name. I admitted that he'd thought I was a ghoul and that I'd let him think that because it was so much easier than telling the truth. Safer too, for everyone concerned.

"That was Glenn?" he asked softly.

"Yeah." I glanced at him over my shoulder. "Six months after Glenn took me in, you hit town, I didn't want to go out with you at first, but you're just so damned persistent. I guess I knew if I let you get close to me that would be it. Then I got to know you, found out that we pretty much had the same opinion of vamps and shifters."

"Not many people who know about them get along with the Garou," he commented, walking slowly toward me. "I was really surprised when you not only recognized it in Bobby, but didn't trip out when he shifted."

I smiled at the memory, then turned back to the window. In Lynchburg I'd gotten very used to seeing werewolves shift form. I pushed the memories of that time away.

"When you got involved with the whole movement that Glenn started, I wanted to tell you the truth about me," I told him, "but I was afraid it would disgust you, that you wouldn't want anything to do with me." My voice had gotten very soft. I took a controlled breath, and whispered, "I would understand if you left now. You could probably get the deposit back on the apartment if you—"

When he put his arms around me I shut up. At first, I stood stiffly, but then I turned and buried my face in his shirt again. He held me tightly against him and kissed my temple. "Is that what you want me to do, luv?" he asked me.

Of course that wasn't what I wanted him to do. Did he think I was nuts? I just didn't want him to feel obligated to stay with me now that he knew the truth. "I would understand—"

"Luv, yes or no, please," he interrupted.

"No," I told him quite honestly. "I love you. It would kill me to lose you now."

"I do not want you to lose me," he replied. "You cannot help who or what your mother was any more than I could have. This does not change anything between us. We move into the apartment next week as planned."

"Don't lie to me, Mac," I warned him looking upward. "I'd believe you."

"I wouldn't lie to you, luv," he assured me with a smile. "But I think you had better be more careful when you throw those stakes. That last one almost hit me."

I searched his face, feeling more vulnerable than I'd ever felt in my life. At last I smiled. "I promise I'll throw it further away from you next time."

He kissed me, and I responded almost desperately. The kiss deepened and everything else was swept away.

Some time later, I felt him bend over the bed and kiss my cheek. I moved a little, looking at the daisy he'd left beside me on the pillow. He walked out not realizing I was awake. I picked up the flower and smelled its gentle fragrance. I wrapped myself in the sheet and hurried to the window. I watched him pause in his stride to look up at me and I pressed my hand to the glass, still holding the daisy.

He raised two fingers to his lips in a familiar gesture and I smiled brightly as he turned and walked away without looking back.

CONFRONTATIONS

AND EVERYTHING YOU GAVE TO ME
CHANGED EVERYTHING I USED TO BE
MUCH MORE THAN ANYONE I EVER KNEW
I DON'T NEED A HERO - CONCRETE BLONDE

A few days later I was leaving my apartment around five thirty to go to the brownstone for dinner when I saw Bobby coming down the hall. Mac was waiting for me, so I was in a bit of a hurry.

"Eliza," he said with a grin. "Want company?"

I smiled back. "Sure, Bobby. Going to dinner?"

"Yeah, Jane's cooking so it should be good." Jane was actually the best cook at the brownstone, but she was teaching Glenn and he was gaining on her pretty quickly.

We walked down the stairs and headed for the brownstone. Bobby kept up a steady stream of conversation and I enjoyed the time alone with him. Tomorrow Mac and I were moving into our new apartment and I knew that I wouldn't be seeing the boy so much.

We were only a few blocks away from the brownstone when I felt the vamp. I stopped and put a hand on Bobby's shoulder. The sun wasn't quite down, but it was behind the buildings so the street was completely in shadow. If there was a vamp moving about at this time of the day, it was probably Kate. She was the only one I'd ever seen moving around before sundown.

"Bobby," I said softly in warning.

His whole body language changed, and I could tell he was ready to fight. "What is it, Eliza?" he asked, his voice still sounding like the twelve year old boy he should have been, not like the vampire killer he was.

"Why don't you run ahead to the brownstone?" I told him pleasantly while I squeezed his shoulder. I didn't want him to argue with me, but then again I didn't want him in danger either. Kate wouldn't hurt me; at least I didn't think she would.

He looked around, but I knew he wouldn't see her. She was in the party store on the corner watching us from the window.

Finally he nodded. "Do you want me to tell them anything?" he whispered.

"It's probably nothing," I told him. "It's too early for them to be out. Just run ahead and stay there."

I felt him relax under my hand, and he nodded again. He broke into a run and headed for the brownstone. I watched until he turned the corner ahead just to make sure that he was safe before I headed back toward the last alley we'd passed.

I could feel Kate following me. Damn, why couldn't I get away from the bitch? Why couldn't she get the hint that I didn't want anything to do with her? I could feel my anger rising and it took an effort to control it.

"What do you want, Kate?" I demanded as I turned around. Not surprisingly, she was standing near the corner of the building.

She took a step down the alley closer to me and I lifted the stake in my hand. She glanced at it, but it really didn't seem to concern her. "Why do you have to be like this?" she asked softly. "I just want to spend time with you, like we used to when you were little. Do you remember that?"

"I remember that you left me with Linda," I said emotionlessly. "I remember how much she hated me."

"No," she protested. "Linda loved you. She treated you like she was her own daughter." I couldn't imagine that. "If that's the case, I hope she never had children."

Kate stepped forward again and I moved away to keep the same distance between us while moving toward the mouth of the alley until my back was to the street. I really didn't want to hurt her, but I would if I had to. Gaia knows she was pissing me off enough that I could have ripped her head off. "Stay away from me, Kate," I told her in a low voice. We weren't exactly out of site from anyone walking by; it wasn't a good place to frenzy.

She looked hurt. "Eliza, I'm your—"

"No," I interrupted her, not buying her act for a minute. "You're not. Don't try to pretend that you're something you've never tried to be before."

"I regret the past, Eliza," she told me sadly. "I just want a chance to start over with you."

Yeah, whatever. "I like our relationship just the way it is."

"We don't have a relationship," she protested.

"Exactly my point." It was way too late for us to start over, it had been too late when I'd seen Linda's blood on Kate's mouth. "Look, you've got one chance to leave town here," I warned her. "If you stick around sooner or later it's gonna come down to you and me. One of us won't walk away, is that what you want?"

"Why does it have to be that way?" she pleaded. "Leave those hunters, come back to the chantry with me. We can get to know each other, we can—"

"Stop, Kate," I told her in a hard voice, "I don't know what you thought you'd get out of me, but I'm not looking to share and grow here. I don't need you, and I don't want you in my life."

"You needed me after Pittsburgh," she reminded me.

"Yeah, I did," I admitted irritably. "But I've dealt with what I am all by myself for a long time now, Kate. Stay away from me or I'm telling you we're gonna throw down."

I heard a noise behind me and moved to my right so that I could look to see what it was but still keep an eye on Kate. To my surprise, I saw Mac come around the corner of the alley with a stake in his hand. I held a hand up to stop him; I didn't want him coming anywhere near her. Kate must have seen it because when he stopped, she laughed. I hate it when she laughs.

"Mac, go back to the brownstone," I said firmly, turning my back to him and watching Kate.

"I'm not leaving you here with her unless there is a stake in her heart." Despite the softness of his voice, I knew he meant it.

"She won't hurt me," I told him, trying to make sure that I was standing between the two of them. I didn't want either of them to do anything stupid. "I'll be all right."

"I'm not leaving," he repeated stubbornly.

Damn, why didn't he listen to me? I wanted to throw the stake I was holding, and not necessarily at Kate.

"Looks like he doesn't follow orders," Kate drawled.

Okay, now I did want to throw the stake at her. "Why don't you go watch the sunset, Kate?" I asked harshly. "I think you'd like that a little better than what's going to happen if you stick around."

She looked past me to Mac. "He's turned you against me, hasn't he?"

I shook my head. "You did that yourself, Kate, a long time ago," I told her, but I could tell by the look on her face that she didn't believe me.

"This isn't over," she said pointedly to Mac before she turned and walked away from us.

"Yes it is," I called after her. "If you come near him, I'll kill you."

I felt Mac's hand on my shoulder, but I waited until I couldn't feel her anymore before I turned into his arms. He held me close to him and I buried my face in his neck.

"Why won't she leave me alone?" I whispered, trying so hard to control the rage that burned inside of me that I was shaking. I knew if I let it get the better of me I'd take out everything in the alley and I didn't want Mac to see me like that. I didn't understand how he could love me now knowing what I was; I really didn't think he'd stick around if he knew what I was capable of.

He held me, smoothing my hair and whispering soothing things until I got control of myself. When I'd calmed down, I didn't feel much like going to the brownstone so we went back to my place.

There were boxes everywhere, ready for us to move into the new apartment the next day. Mac cleaned the couch off and we sat down, our arms around each other. He didn't say anything, just held me. I wondered if he was having second thoughts about our living together. For real now, if he was going to change his mind, now was the time, before he took me to meet his family next week.

I didn't want to think about the future, didn't want to think about losing him. Just being in his arms made me feel better, safe. In his arms I could pretend that everything would really be all right some day. Eventually I fell asleep.

I don't know much later the sound of voices woke me up.

"Fuck," I heard Glenn whisper. "How is this possible?"

"I don't know," Mac replied softly. "I'm not sure what we can do about it either, she seems hesitant to destroy it."

"Is this her master?" He sounded surprised.

"Not exactly."

I opened my eyes a little and saw the two of them standing near the sink. Neither of them heard me sit up.

"We have to destroy it," Glenn told Mac. "We can't let it get to her again."

He shook his head. "I think this is something she may have to deal with herself. It's personal."

"That's why we have to take care of it, brother," Glenn protested urgently. "She may not be able to."

"I will take care of her," I said in a hard voice. "You won't do a damn thing." Who was Glenn to think he could solve my problems for me?

"It is a vampire in our city," Glenn reminded me. "We all vowed to destroy every one of them, even you."

"This is different," I told him coldly, getting up and walking toward the two of them. "I'll take care of it."

"I don't think so, Eliza," Glenn said firmly. "We go after it tonight."

"He's right, luv," Mac added, touching my arm soothingly. "We can't take the risk of her trying anything with you."

I didn't need him to try and soothe me. "This has nothing to do with you," I bit out, shrugging off his hand. "It is not your decision." Just like his hunting hadn't been my decision. The rage I'd felt earlier was rising again and I tried to fight it.

"Why are you protecting her?" Glenn demanded. "Do you want your master back? Is her blood more important than our lives? Is that—"

I couldn't let him finish. I grabbed him by the throat and shoved him back against the refrigerator. "I don't have a 'master'," I hissed. Did he really think I'd let any of them die if I could stop it? "I will take care of Kate if I have to."

"I might believe you if you weren't cutting off my air," he managed to say in a hard voice. "Calm down, Eliza."

The fact that he was doing what normally calmed me down only pissed me off more. I slammed him back against the refrigerator hard enough to send it rocking back against the wall. "Fuck you, Glenn," I told him, fighting the rage and the pain that made me want to hurt him more. "How could you even think I'd betray you, any of you?"

Mac put a hand on my shoulder to try and pull me away, but I shrugged it off. A moment later the hair on the back of my neck rose and I knew Glenn was trying to calm me with magic. Damn it, I'd warned him about that.

"Don't fucking use magic on me, you bastard," I growled, barely keeping a hold on that part of me that wanted to kill him. I slammed him back against the refrigerator again, this time hard enough to knock the breath out of him.

I don't know what would have happened if Mac hadn't grabbed me by the shoulders and spun me around. I could feel myself losing control, giving over for the first time in years to the beast that slept in my heart.

He shook me once, hard and quick. "Eliza, calm down," he said harshly.

I looked up at him, but I didn't really see him through the red haze in front of my eyes.

"Now, Eliza," he added sternly.

Something about his tone hit me just right. It was the same thing Glenn had tried, but for some reason this time it was working. I blinked a few times and waited to make sure the hold I had on my temper was a good one before I pulled away from him.

I still needed a release. I needed to break something, anything. I walked over to the pole I used to work out on and stood looking at it for a moment. I focused all of my hatred and anger on one spot in the center of it and lashed out with my foot. It snapped in half.

Running my hand through my hair, I stood looking down at the four-inch thick pole, knowing it could have been Glenn's neck. I closed my eyes and started breathing in an exercise Mac had been trying to teach me. I'd never quite gotten the hang of it before, but now it just fell into place.

I could have killed him, wanted to kill him. If I'd lost it, I could have killed them both without even thinking. How could I think that I could live a normal life? Hadn't I learned by

now that I destroyed everything I touched? I had to end this now, before anyone else got hurt.

"I'm sorry," I said softly, turning around and looking sadly at Glenn. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

He took a step toward me. "I know," he replied calmly. "It's okay."

"No, it's not okay," I protested. It would never be okay again. "I should have known better." I looked at Mac and knew I couldn't stay with him, run the risk of hurting or killing him. "I can't do this anymore, I'm sorry," I told him. I turned and reached for the bag of weapons on the pile near the door. It had everything I needed to start over somewhere else.

"What are you doing?" Mac asked.

"What I should have done a year ago," I replied. I couldn't let him see how hard this was for me or he'd try and talk me into staying. I put the strap across my chest and I headed for the door. "I'm leaving."

"Eliza—" Glenn called out, but Mac cut him off as he followed me into the hall.

"Wait a minute!" When I ignored him, he caught up to me and pulled me around by the arm. "Eliza, think about what you're doing."

"I think about it every day," I said honestly. It was time to do more than think about it. "The longer I stick around the more chance that somebody's gonna die because of me. I can't live with that. I'm gone."

I tried to pull away but he wouldn't let me and I didn't want to hurt him. "No, I won't let you walk away from me like this," he told me firmly. "You can't leave just because someone could get hurt. We're hunters, Eliza, we take that chance."

"You don't understand," I said softly. "I could have killed Glenn so easily if you hadn't stopped me. It's like there's this monster inside of me and it was taking control. He's my friend and I didn't care, I wanted to kill him." I would have killed him if Mac hadn't been there to stop me.

"But you didn't. You got control of yourself and he's fine." He was trying to be the voice of reason and I loved him even more for it, but he was wrong.

I reached up and touched the side of his face gently, feeling the warmth of his skin. "I'm not." I told him softly. "I can't put you in danger, Mac, I love you too much. I'd die if anything happened to you. I'm sorry."

Once more I tried to turn away and once again he spun me back around. Why couldn't he let me do the right thing here? Why couldn't he let me go away? God, if anything happened to him because of me I wouldn't want to live. I couldn't bear to stay and watch it, but he wasn't letting go of my arm and the only way I could break free was to hurt him.

"But I love you," he whispered.

Bursting into tears was the last thing I expected to do, but that's exactly what I did. My legs lost all strength and I would have fallen but Mac was there to catch me. He picked me up in his arms and carried me back to the apartment. Glenn closed the door and watched helplessly while Mac sat down on the couch with me in his lap.

Didn't he understand that I didn't want to hurt anyone? Didn't he get it? People have a tendency to die around me. I hate it, but it's true. I'm damned, you know? Maybe people dying are part of my curse.

For the second time that night he held me until I fell asleep. When I woke up in the morning he was still holding me. He looked so young while he slept, so peaceful. How could I find the strength to leave him?

"You can't," Glenn whispered from across the room. He was sitting against the refrigerator watching us. He didn't look like he'd slept all night.

"Can't what?" I asked softly, trying not to wake Mac.

"You can't leave him," he told me. "He needs you. He couldn't take it if you left."

"He's strong," I replied coldly. "He'd survive."

"No he wouldn't," Glenn said firmly. "He needs you just as much as you need him, don't you see that? He needs you."

I turned to look at Mac, thinking about what Glenn had said. I knew Mac loved me, but did he need me that much? I closed my eyes and laid my head back down on his shoulder. If he needed me even half as much as I did him, I couldn't leave. I wasn't sure I could have walked away last night, but it didn't matter now.

This time here with Mac was the best I'd ever had it in my life. Silently I vowed to watch over him, to make sure nothing happened to him. I'd do the meditation he wanted to teach me and the breathing exercises and anything else he wanted me to do so that the beast never took over.

We'd make it work. Somehow, we'd make it work.

THE RAID

EXIT LIGHT, ENTER NIGHT

TAKE MY HAND, WE'RE OFF TO NEVER-NEVER LAND.

ENTER SANDMAN - METALLICA

Our new apartment was on the third floor of a brownstone overlooking a beautiful park. Sometimes we watched children playing in the park and told ourselves that what we were doing would help them to grow up safely.

On what turned out to be our last night in the flat we opened a bottle of wine and celebrated our one-week's anniversary living there. Mac hadn't told his family about our engagement yet, but we were going to Ireland in a few days to share the news and celebrate his nephew's birthday. Looking back, things would have been much better if we hadn't waited.

We drank our wine and listened to sappy love songs, dancing barefoot on the hardwood floors until we couldn't stand to be apart any longer. Mac picked me up and laid me down on the floor where we'd made love so tenderly, so peacefully that I never wanted it to end.

Some time later, I pulled on Mac's shirt and started cleaning up our mess. I felt his gaze on me when I heard a noise from the spare bedroom of the apartment and felt something else in the pit of my stomach; fear. I looked in that direction and saw Mac quietly rise to his feet.

I edged toward the fireplace, hoping to grab one of the wrought iron tools or a slim piece of wood. Unfortunately I hadn't unpacked completely, and there were no stakes hidden near me. I'd seen Mac with vamps before and I knew he could take care of himself.

It was dark in the apartment, but Mac must have gotten his hands on something because when they burst into the room, he staked the first one that reached him. The vampire fell to the floor just as another one, a really ugly one, went after me. The vamp tripped on the carpet and I shoved the fireplace poker through its stomach, but it just laid on the floor and laughed at me.

It was creepy to see the blood flowing freely from its stomach. It rolled to its feet and grabbed my shoulders, throwing me across the room where I hit the wall hard enough to drive the air from my lungs. It pulled the poker from its body and tossed it aside.

Mac shouted something, but I couldn't hear him over the ringing in my ears. I think he called my name, but I can't be sure. I know that I tried to scream his name when I saw Dougal grab him from behind, but it came out a whisper.

Then the one I'd impaled was on me again but I was able to bring my leg up to thrust it away from me. I think I surprised it because this time it was the one who flew across the room. I might have been able to help Mac if it hadn't been for the fourth vamp that grabbed me from behind. I felt teeth sink into my neck and tried to thrust my head back, but it grabbed my hair and held me tightly in place.

I was held helplessly, looking across the room where Dougal stood holding Cormac to his chest, his head bent over my lover's neck. Once more I whispered his name before the blood loss overcame me. It was the last time I saw him alive.

When I woke up I had a bad taste in my mouth. I was locked in a small bare room and the only door was made of steel. There was no way that I could break out, even with my normal strength. I tried anyway, but I was very weak and only bruised my hands from the effort. I

wanted to scream with frustration, but I didn't have the energy. I turned and sat down on the cold floor instead.

Some time later I snapped out of the doze I had fallen into when I heard a key in the lock. The ugly vamp I'd fought opened the door and stood grinning down at me.

"It's good to see that Valerie didn't drink too much," the Nosferatu growled. "We thought you were history."

I recognized the name even though I hadn't seen her face. I pushed up against the wall until I was standing. "It takes more than a bloodsucker to make history of me," I retorted sharply, hoping for an opening to escape and the strength to take advantage of it.

It laughed. "Too bad your lover wasn't quite as strong."

The words froze my mind. "Mac?" I breathed softly.

"Dead as a doorknob," it crowed. "Dougal had himself a feast on that one."

I refused to believe it and would have said so, but I saw a movement behind the creature. From out of nowhere, a blade cut across its throat and the headless body fell to the floor, crumbling to a pile of slime within seconds.

Shocked, I looked at the woman who now stood in the doorway, a short sword in her hand. "Kate?" I whispered.

"Come on," she demanded in a low voice. "You have to get out of here."

I reluctantly took the cold hand she held out for me, still dizzy from the blood loss I had suffered. I didn't want to trust her, but knew I had no choice. "Where's Mac?"

She pulled me from the room and helped me move quickly down the hall. "We can't help him, dear," she said softly. "He's dead."

I stopped. "He can't be," I denied stubbornly. "I don't believe it."

Kate looked down at me sadly. "You have to, dear," she told me. "It's true. We have to go now, or you'll join him. Right now, no one else knows you're here."

I allowed her to lead me toward the exit, my mind frozen, unable to believe that Mac was really gone. Somehow Kate got me outside and into her Pinto without anyone seeing us, then drove off into the night.

THE MOUNTAIN

AND I CANNOT FIND YOU HERE
YOU LEFT ME TATTERED AND TORN
SPANISH DOLL - DOE

Kate refused to take me back to the apartment. She told me she had stopped there just after sunset and found the place a mess. She figured out what had happened and went to the Tremere chantry to see if she could still help us. To my surprise, I had been unconscious nearly forty-eight hours.

She had grabbed some of our things, but almost everything had been destroyed. As she was Tremere herself, she had been able to get into the chantry without a problem. She said she'd asked a few discreet questions and found out that Mac was dead and where I was being held. I begged her to drive me to Richmond, and she agreed without asking why.

I'm afraid I wasn't very friendly to Kate on our trip. I couldn't help thinking that she should have known what her clan mates were planning. If she had known, I like to think she would have warned us. I blamed her for Mac's death, even though I couldn't quite bring myself to believe he was dead.

In Richmond Kate checked us into a hotel room and helped me into bed. I only allowed myself to sleep a few hours before I took her keys and her money and left her there sleeping in the darkened room.

I drove to the mountain in West Virginia where Mac and I had agreed to meet if we were ever separated. I stopped only for gas, I didn't even bother with food. It was near midnight when I pulled into the parking lot of the observation tower and walked slowly up the snow-covered mountain, searching the woods for any sign of my lover. There was nothing.

The last visitors had left long before dark and I was alone when I reached the base of the observation tower. Pulling myself up by the rail, I carefully climbed the ramp to the top. The night was clear and cold, but I didn't feel the chill. Wrapping myself in blankets I'd found in the car, I eased myself down in a corner of the tower and, after a time, slept.

I woke at sunrise and looked around me, for a moment forgetting where I was. Carefully I rose to my feet and made my way to the bathrooms near where I had parked the car, where I was violently ill. I wiped my mouth and went back to Kate's car where I found a half-frozen bottle of water on the floor of the back seat. I drank it slowly, not wanting to be sick again.

I spent the day in the car watching tourists pull in and out, searching for some sign of Mac and trying to make the water last. Once in a while I would stumble to the rest rooms, but each time I did I found it harder to do so. I wanted to wait on the observation tower, but from a glance in the rear-view mirror I knew I would scare the visitors and the last thing I wanted was to draw attention to myself.

When the last car drove out at dusk, I took the blankets and carefully made my way back to the top of the tower. What had once taken Mac and me a mere five minutes to walk now took me almost an hour.

I stood at the top and looked out over the sparse trees that grew at the top of the mountain. I could hear the nighttime animals all around me, even the howl of a wolf in the distance. I kept Mac's face at the front of my mind, hoping against hope that he would join me and we would go to Ireland like we'd planned.

Eventually cold and exhaustion forced me to my knees and I crouched against the rail, crying silently. I hated Kindred in that moment more than I'd ever hated anything in my life, more than I hated the woman who'd pretended to be my mother, more than I hated the father I'd never met, more than I ever hated what I was.

My memories of the next day are hazy at best. I know that I spent most of it in the car, and that by noon I lacked the energy to even stumble my way to the rest rooms. At sundown I forced myself to make the climb to the tower once more.

Late that night Kate was there without warning, kneeling at my side and wiping the tears from my face. She held something to my lips and I drank. I don't remember what she fed me, but afterwards I felt a little better.

"What would Cormac think to see you like this, child?" she asked harshly.

As if she cared what he would have thought, but I was too weak to be angry with her. "He wouldn't think anything," I replied, my voice as empty and lifeless as I felt. "He's dead."

"Then why are you sitting here waiting for him to show up?" Her eyes were kind, and I had to remind myself that I couldn't trust her.

"Why do you care?" I demanded weakly. I laid my head back against the rail and closed my eyes. I was cold, so cold, and I didn't think anything would ever warm me up.

"Do you think I want my only daughter to kill herself?" Her voice was very soft; even now, alone as we were, she was still afraid that others might learn her dark secret.

I smiled bitterly without opening my eyes. "You can always have another," I bit out harshly.

She laughed. "Do you think I would go through that again? I very nearly didn't survive your birth," she reminded me. "I couldn't bear to watch another child grow up hating me."

"I do hate you," I said emotionlessly, too tired to sound convincing.

Kate just smiled. "Are you planning on staying here or do you want to live?"

I looked at her, knowing she wouldn't like the answer.

"Does it help to know that you carry his child?" she asked softly.

My eyes widened. "A child?"

"If I'm not mistaken," she said. "A few days, a week at the most. You should think of her now, just as I thought of you when your father was killed."

How could I take care of a baby? I had no money, few job skills, and no husband. Hell, I couldn't even keep a damn job for very long. I didn't like where I found myself, but at least I knew I had to live, for my daughter's sake.

Somehow I knew the baby was a girl, that she was the child I'd dreamed about. Knowing that she would never look up at Mac with trust in her eyes made me start crying. Kate lifted me gently and carried me down the trail to the car. She laid me in the back seat and gave me water to drink before she started the car and drove away.

Near dawn Kate stopped at a hotel and ordered a large breakfast from room service for me. She closeted herself in the locked bathroom with the car keys while I slept most of the day away. By the time she came out, I was eating dinner and feeling much better.

I still felt weak, but I knew that if I ate well I would recover quickly, more quickly than the average human would. Of course, I'm not your garden-variety human, am I?

I kept wondering what the child would like be with me as her mother. I'd had a hard time as a kid given what the three of us were, and Linda had been no substitute for a real mother.

How long before my child's friends found out the truth about her freakish mother? About my unusual strength? Abilities? What if just by living with me my child learned those abilities, and drove everyone away from her, just as I had? Maybe if Mac had lived we might have found a way around it, but I knew that I couldn't handle it alone. Still, I knew there was no way I could abort the pregnancy. I didn't know what to do.

I came out of my stupor when Kate drove across the Maine State line. "Where are we going?" I asked, the first words I had spoken in almost twenty-four hours.

"I have friends in Bar Harbor," she told me. "You can stay with them until you get on your feet."

"Friends?" I repeated, suspicious. I didn't want to have anything to do with Kindred or their ghouls, and I think she knew it.

"Human," she clarified. "They don't know what we are, and no one else knows of them."

"Good enough friends for us to hide with?" I asked.

"For you to hide with, I'll be returning to Baltimore."

That surprised me. "Why?"

She glanced over at me then looked back at the road. "Do you care?"

Okay, I had to admit I deserved that. I'd never shown any concern for her before, and she had no reason to think that I cared about her safety now. Actually, I was surprised to find that I did care.

"Yes," I admitted slowly. "Regardless of our differences, you saved the life of my baby. I owe you for that."

"I saved your life as well, do you forget that?"

"Saving my life made us even, Kate," I told her coolly.

She nodded thoughtfully. "I think I can talk my way back into the chantry," she said after a while. "I can't just walk away from my clan any more than I could have let them kill you. You don't know how strong it is, how much a part of you the clan becomes after your embrace."

I didn't know and, please God, I never would.

"I want you to stay with the Wright's and let them help you. They owe me," she added.

"For what?"

"I saved their lives," she said simply.

I didn't know whether to believe her or not, but I really didn't have a choice. I let her drive and tried to figure out what I could do to make sure the baby didn't end up like me.

BAR HARBOR

SHE SAID, 'I CANNOT CRY
AND I CANNOT THINK OR FEEL OR EVEN TRY.'
LOVE IS ONLY SLEEPING - THE MONKEES

Martina and Gene Wright were an older couple that lived on a farm just outside of Bar Harbor. They greeted Kate warmly and were more than happy to have me come and stay with them. Martina took one look at me and bundled me into bed where she made me stay until she was satisfied I wouldn't fall over and die on her. By that time three days had passed and Kate was long gone.

When Martina went into town for groceries, I borrowed Gene's truck and drove to the nearest pay phone. I dropped quarters into it and dialed a number from memory. When I got the operator telling me the number had been disconnected, I dialed a few more numbers. The phone started ringing again then I heard Glenn's voice on the answering machine.

"Give me your name and location. As soon as we can, we'll come for you."

I closed my eyes and leaned my forehead on the glass of the booth. From the sounds of that message, our apartment wasn't the only one that was raided. Everyone must have been hit.

"Glenn, please pick up," I pleaded softly, tears streaming down my face. "It's me, Eliza." I waited, but there was no reply.

"Mac's dead," I told him when I was sure he wasn't going to pick up the phone. "God, I can't even think without him." My voice broke and for a moment I couldn't speak. "I'm sorry, I'll try again when I can." If I could get back to the payphone any time soon, that was.

I'd almost hung up the phone when I put it back to my ear. "Please don't be dead," I whispered.

Martina was very upset that I'd left the house, but she understood when I told her that I had to call an old friend. She told me I could use their phone, but I didn't want to do that, calling from a nearby pay phone was risky enough. The next day she drove me herself to the pay phone so I could try it again. This time Glenn answered. When I heard his voice, I started to cry.

"Glenn, it's me," I told him through my tears.

"Eliza, Christ, I've been so worried about you. Are you all right?" he demanded.

I bit my lip to hide a sob. "Mac's dead."

Glenn was silent for a long time. Finally I thought I heard him whisper something about death walking but I couldn't be sure.

"Glenn?"

"I'm sorry," he said softly. "Eliza, are you...?"

I figured was asking if I'd been embraced. "Still breathing," I told him.

"Did Kate get to you?" he asked softly.

Not in the way he meant. "No, I'm safe," I whispered. "Who else got hit?"

"Everyone," he said. "Where are you? I can bring you here right now."

I closed my eyes. I couldn't even think about going back to the city I'd loved Mac in. "No, I'm not coming back, I can't," I murmured. "How many?"

"Five dead, seven embraced."

I leaned against the side of the booth; it was worse than I'd imagined. I wasn't so sure I wanted to know, but, "Who?"

"Jeff," he said in a dead voice, "the Brady's, Kay, Clay, Carol, Jane."

"Damn," I whispered sadly. "I'm sorry I can't be there to help you take care of it."

"It's done." His voice was hard. I couldn't even begin to imagine what it must have been like for him to destroy the woman he'd loved. He paused for a moment then added, "Jared, Bobby and me are the only ones left."

"Did you get Galloway?" I asked.

"I'm sorry, Eliza," he told me, "he's gone. Europe maybe, we can't find him."

How the fuck was I supposed to make it to Europe? It didn't matter, I couldn't go after him until the baby was born. I had an image of trying to stake the vamp with a baby on my hip and felt hysterical laughter bubbling inside me. I had to get a hold of myself or I would go insane.

It was better to concentrate on things I could deal with. "Kate?"

"No one's seen her," Glenn said, his voice hard. Then he softened. "Look, tell me where you are, Eliza. I'll come get you, take care of you."

I almost said yes, but I knew what it would mean. Both of us getting over our lover's deaths, counting on each other to learn how to live again, I couldn't face that. "I'm sorry, Glenn. I can't go back there. I can't—"

"We'll go anywhere you want, Eliza."

"I can't. I'm gone, Glenn. Take care of Bobby, will you?" He'd need someone to take care of him now that his mother was dead.

"Eliza—"

I didn't want to hear the arguments, I was afraid I'd give in. "Tell him I'll miss him," I whispered. "I'll miss all of you, but I'll miss you and Bobby the most."

"Eliza, wait—"

"Forget about me," I told him firmly. "Forget you even met me." It was safer that way, for all of us.

"Don't do anything stupid, girl," he warned me.

I had to laugh. "No, I've done all the stupid things I plan to," I said wryly. "I'll stay safe, I have to." I didn't want to tell him about the baby, I knew he'd insist on coming for me. "Don't worry about me, I'll survive," I said. "Goodbye, Glenn."

I hung up the phone before he could say anything to change my mind. I stood there crying until Martina came to help me back into her car. She didn't like that I'd upset myself so badly when I was still so weak, but she understood.

The Wright's farm wasn't very big, but it was a lot for Gene to handle by himself. He liked the work, and once I got back on my feet I helped him and Martina as much as I could. I hid my pregnancy for as long as possible, but eventually it was wicked obvious.

Martina asked me if I wanted to talk about it, but I really didn't. I told her that I'd been engaged and that my fiancé had died before we could be married, which was the truth. When she realized that I had no way to take care of the baby, she got real quiet. A few days later I found out why.

The Wrights had been trying for years to have a baby, but nothing worked for them. They'd given up hope a few years ago, but now I was like a gift from God. They asked if I would let them adopt my baby and raise it as their own.

I'd been with them for three months by then and I felt I knew them pretty well. They were a kind couple, very patient, and I knew they'd make wonderful parents, something I didn't think I could ever be. I agreed, knowing it was the best thing I could do for my child.

During the next six months I never left the farm. Martina and I had agreed that since I planned on staying in Bar Harbor it was best that no one found out I was pregnant. There would be fewer questions once the baby was born if no one suspected I was her mother. She found a doctor who was willing to come to the farm and keep quiet about the whole thing.

Martina spent a lot of time making things for the baby and turning one of the spare rooms into a nursery. She tried to teach me how to knit, but I just didn't have the patience for it. As the pregnancy progressed, I was restricted more and more from helping Gene and I spent a lot of time with Martina. She taught me a lot about patience and with every day that passed I was more and more grateful that Kate had brought me to Maine.

Corrine was born on a cold January afternoon at the Wright's farm. I remember looking at the sunrise that morning and thinking that Mac should have lived to see his child born. At some point I realized that I was looking off toward Ireland and I wondered what his family would think if they knew, if they would even believe me about who the baby's father was.

An hour later I went into labor. I didn't tell Martina at first, I knew it would be at least a few hours before the baby was born. When I knew the time was close, I went inside the house to find her.

"It's time," I said simply.

She called the doctor I'd been seeing and he made it to the house just in time to help the baby into the world. He cleaned both of us up and laid her in my arms. I loved her in that moment more than I thought I could ever love anyone or anything. She was so beautiful and so helpless, and I saw so much of Mac in her that I cried.

"What are you going to name her?" Martina asked a few hours later.

I looked up at her in surprise. "I thought you were adopting her," I said, confused.

"We are," she assured me. "But Gene and I have talked about it and we know how much you care about her. We want you to name her and help us raise her."

That made me cry again. When I'd finally calmed down, I held Mac's daughter in my arms and knew what I had to name her.

"Corrine Mackenzie," I whispered against her hair. No one else would ever understand the significance of her name, but I'd always know that she was named after Cormac Brennan, her father. It was a small way to remember him, but one I more than welcomed.

Soon after Corrine's birth, I moved into town. Most days I spent at the farm, helping Martina with Corrine or Gene with the farm work. I worked a few odd jobs before I eventually I got a day job at a dairy bar, but that only lasted the summer. I went back to waitressing, at least that was something I had quite a bit of experience doing.

Because of Glenn and Mac helping me get a hold of my temper, and because of Martina's calming influence, I was able to hold jobs for longer than I used to. Of course they didn't pay much, but at least some money was coming in, enough to pay for the apartment and let me start giving Martina money to help out with Corrine.

Martina didn't want to accept the money at first, but when I convinced her that I had plenty, she agreed to take it. She didn't know how often I went hungry so that I could save every penny for Corrine. If she had, I know she never would have taken a dime.

SURVIVAL

THE COLORS OF THAT PIECE OF TIME
ARE STILL SO FRESH INSIDE MY MIND
AND IT MAKES THE MOVIE OF MY LIFE SEEM PALE
I DON'T NEED A HERO - CONCRETE BLONDE

When I first moved into town I thought there were no vamps anywhere. I caught a glimpse of a few shapeshifters, but none of them came too close. By nature Garou are pack animals, and I wasn't part of the pack.

One night I found a vampire. It was a pitiful thing, hungry and hunting near one of the working class bars. Just the sight of it filled me with rage. I thought it would be easy, but it wasn't. It nearly broke my arm before I could stake the damn thing. Cutting off its head was the most satisfying thing I'd done since Corrine was born. I vowed right then and there that the vamps wouldn't touch her, that I'd keep this town free of them if it killed me. It almost did more than once.

There were a few other vamps that lived in Bar Harbor, but not many. It took me two months to get them all, and in the process I drew the attention of two separate groups in town: the local Garou, and The Society of Leopold.

The werewolves were impressed by my drive to kill every vamp in the city, and they would have adopted me into their pack if I had let them. They were different from the Garou I'd lived with in Lynchburg, but I still didn't fit in. Besides, I was still mourning Mac and I wouldn't let anyone get too close to me. We hunted together sometimes when the monsters we were chasing got too tough for us to take on alone.

Rich Hammond was the head of the Society in Bar Harbor, not that there were that many of them. He tried to talk me into joining them, but I didn't want to give up my independence. Plus there was no guarantee I'd be assigned to stay in town and I needed to stay close to Corrine.

I did accept the bounties the Society offered, though, and used the money to supplement my income and start a savings account for my daughter's future. I lived simply, with few luxuries, but it was more than enough for me. Hell, it was better than most of the places I'd lived in my life.

Rich was a little more adamant about wanting me to join the Society than Father Donovan had ever been. I tried to tell him that I didn't believe in his God, but he just said something about God working in mysterious ways and kept right on trying to convince me.

It wasn't like I enjoyed the work I did for the Society. Sometimes their idea of a monster wasn't the same as mine, and Rich and I argued a lot about what contracts I'd take and what ones I wouldn't. At the time I thought there were some things I wouldn't do, not even for Corrine. I should have saved myself the trouble, turns out there's not anything I won't do to keep her safe. Nothing.

The engagement ring on my finger brought on more questions than I wanted to answer, so one day I bought a slender silver chain with some of my savings and strung the ring on it. I cried when I took off the ring Mac had put on my finger, but knowing that it would be close to my heart made me feel a little better. And it wasn't like I was going to forget him, now was I?

Most nights I spent at least a few hours patrolling the streets, making sure that the Kindred stayed away. Between the Garou pack and me word soon got out that Bar Harbor was not a friendly place for vamps.

To my surprise I didn't fall back to the recklessness that had plagued me before I'd met Glenn. I was actually very careful to stay safe and I knew that Corrine was the cause. I wanted to see her grow up; I wanted to see my grandchildren, even though I knew I'd have no right to claim them as mine.

No, recklessness wasn't my biggest problem those first few years in Bar Harbor, depression was. I missed Mac with an intensity that never seemed to go away. Even after years went by I kept turning to talk to him, expecting him to be there. I spent a lot of time walking the beaches throwing stones out into the surf.

On the few occasions when I looked at my face in the mirror, it bothered me to see the shadows in my eyes. The only thing that kept me going was knowing that my hunting kept the city safe for Corrine. She was the only thing in the world that was important to me, and my only purpose in life was to keep her safe.

During those first few years in Bar Harbor, I tried to separate myself from Corrine. I thought that it couldn't be good for her to have me around. For real now, did she really need someone like me in her life? The Wrights were good people, and I wished I could be like them, but I wasn't and I knew it. I didn't want to contaminate my daughter with my hate and bitterness.

Besides, just because I could usually control my temper didn't mean it didn't occasionally get away from me. That's not to say I ever lost it around my daughter, I didn't, ever. I was just afraid that I would.

Of course, once Corrine was old enough to realize that her behavior could effect everyone else, I didn't have a choice about visiting her. How could I tell a four-year-old child that I was afraid being with me would ruin her character? I didn't. I just made damn sure that I was never a bad influence for her.

Martina never had a problem with me seeing Corrine when I came out to help Gene with the farm. She doted on the girl, and so did I. She was concerned at first about the reputation I'd gotten in town for fighting, but when she saw that I wouldn't let it affect Corrine, she relaxed. She was a good mother for my child and I knew it.

Once in a while Martina would try to set me up with someone, but it never worked out. I tried to tell myself that I just wasn't meeting the right guys, but deep down I knew it was because I still loved Mac. Not that it mattered why I didn't want anyone else; the fact was that I'd rather be alone with my memories than with anyone else except Corrine. What's that old line about 'better to have loved and lost'?

That didn't mean I didn't make friends. Dennis Baker was one of the Garou high in the pack, and for a while we spent a lot of time together. He reminded me a little of Bobby, or what Bobby would be like in ten years. I thought of him like the brother I never had, but it took me some time to realize that he cared a lot more for me than that.

The thing was, no matter how hard I tried to forget about Baltimore and get on with my life, I couldn't. Even years later I was still having nightmares about the raid on our apartment. Each time I dreamed about it I relived it from making love to watching him die. I couldn't even think about being with anyone else.

Dennis tried to be patient but when I wouldn't explain why I wouldn't go out with him, he got very frustrated. One day he confronted me on one of my walks on the beach. I tried to explain that I didn't have the heart to love him, but he didn't want to listen.

"Do you know how hard it is to find someone who will accept you just the way you are?" he demanded.

"I know exactly how hard it is, Dennis," I said sadly, turning away.

"How about someone who will accept me the way I am?" he asked. He grabbed my arm and spun me around, anger showing on his face. "I have never once had a woman like me for who I am. The rage gets in the way, Eliza, but you just take it in stride. How can I walk away from that?"

"The rage gets me too," I said, letting my own anger rise to the surface. "Don't you think I have this-this beast inside of me too? Don't you think I want to have a normal life?" I pulled my arm out of his hand and walked toward the water, taking deep breaths to calm myself before I lost it.

Dennis followed, keeping a little distance between us until he saw that I had regained control. "We could have something, Eliza," he said so softly that the sound of the waves almost hid his voice.

"No, we couldn't," I told him sadly. "There's another reason I can't. I had someone in my life once, a long time ago. He died."

"You loved him?"

"God, yes," I whispered. "I love him so much."

He touched my shoulder. "I could make you forget him, Eliza," he said earnestly. "We could go somewhere else, start over. You wouldn't have to hunt for the Society anymore; I'd take care of—"

The choked sound I made might have been laughter. "Don't you think I've tried to forget him?" I demanded. "I can never forget him. He was my life." I didn't bother to protest that I needed the money the Society paid me to make sure Corrine had a good life, I hadn't told him the truth about her either.

He dropped his hand and stepped away from me. "I'm sorry, Eliza," he said softly. "I had no idea—"

I cut him off. "No, I'm sorry," I insisted. "I don't like to talk about it, and sometimes I can pretend it doesn't hurt anymore. I'd still like to be your friend, if you'd let me."

"Of course," he replied, but from the pain in his eyes I knew he was lying. "Look, I've got to go, I'll see you around."

I told him goodbye with a smile, even though I was crying inside. He left town a few weeks later and I never saw him again.

BLOOD CONTRACT

SO IT'S TOO LATE THEN
YOU COULD HAVE TOLD ME WHEN LIVING DIED
AND PASSION LIED
STRONGER THAN ME - MELISSA ETHERIDGE

One summer night I was hunting down rumors of a new vamp in town when I snuck into an abandoned house just outside the city limits. I found the vamp, but I didn't kill her; it was Kate.

I stood and stared at her for a minute, stake poised, and she smiled back at me.

"How have you been, Eliza?" she asked softly.

"Surviving," I said without thinking.

"I know," she said sadly. "I've been watching you. You've lost weight."

"Where have you been?" I demanded, angry that she would still try to mother me after all these years.

"Around."

"What do you want?" I finally lowered the stake, knowing that I wouldn't be using it on her, tonight anyway.

"I want you to stop hunting," she told me.

I laughed. "I can't do that, Kate," I replied. "I want my child to be safe from your kind."

"My kind?" she asked. "Do you forget that you – and she – came from my kind?"

I sobered. "I can't forget that," I whispered. It was something I lived with every day of my life.

"The Kindred have grown tired of you keeping them from the city," she told me. "They plan to have you killed."

I smiled grimly. "They can try."

"They will watch you," she continued. "They will find out what is important to you, and they will take it away. You saw them kill Cormac, can you watch them kill Corrine and the Wrights?"

"What do you mean?" I growled.

"The prince of Bangor sent his childe here to establish the city as a colony," she explained. "You killed him. Now he wants to see you suffer before he kills you. He plans your embrace."

"I would rather die," I spit out.

"Then he will make sure you do not," she said firmly. She took a step closer to me and stopped at the look on my face. "I realize that you hate my kind, Eliza, but you have to stop hunting them. I don't want to see you dead or embraced, and I want your daughter to live. Please, you have to listen to me."

I listened. She told me she knew the Society had approached me and to my amazement she encouraged me to join them. When she explained that her clan would pay me a lot of money to spy on the Inquisition for her clan, I laughed and walked out on her.

One afternoon a week later Corrine and I were walking along the sidewalk toward the beach. I had picked her up to give Martina some time alone, and we were going to go swimming. We were almost there when she darted ahead to pick up a branch that was lying on the side of the road.

Suddenly I saw a car come barreling down the street. When it was about fifty feet from Corrine, it swerved to our side of the road. It was headed straight for her. My heart stopped in fear, but my muscles reacted without waiting for my brain to catch up.

I darted full speed ahead, grabbed my daughter around the waist and threw her toward the bushes lining the road. A second later the car hit me, but I was ready for it. I hit the ground rolling with nothing more than a sore shoulder to show for it.

Corrine was crying and I hurried over to where she'd landed. I picked her up and held her for a long time until both our tears had stopped. Other than a few scratches from the bushes and skinned knees, she wasn't hurt. She even still wanted to go to the beach. The fact that she was so brave almost made me want to cry again.

We went to the beach, but I couldn't relax. I kept watching for someone else to try and kill her, even though I didn't really think they would. They'd proved their point. If I hadn't been there to pull Corrine out of the way, if I hadn't been fast enough....

After I'd taken Corrine home, I went back to the beach alone. I took the ring from inside my shirt and held it between the tips of my fingers. I closed my eyes and listened to the waves crashing against the shore and wanted so badly for Mac to be here with me that I could almost smell him.

"I'm in trouble, Mac," I whispered to the ring. "It's bad and I don't know what to do. I know we swore we'd die before we helped them, but how can I sit back and watch them kill our daughter?" I wasn't stupid enough to think I'd be able to keep them from her forever. And once they killed me, there'd be no one left to protect her.

"What am I supposed to do?" I asked softly. Of course, there was only one thing I could do.

When night fell I was back at the abandoned house. When Kate rose, she found me standing over her with a long sharp sword.

"I will not allow them to hurt Corrine," I told her harshly.

"They will kill everything you care about if you don't help us," she told me. "I did everything I could, but the only way they will spare you and Corrine is for you to join the Inquisition and spy on them for us."

"How do I know that they won't kill her anyway?" I demanded.

She rose slowly and took a parchment from inside her suit. "I have a contract that a Tremere high in the clan has already signed. If you also sign it, it binds you both to follow the contract until final death."

I took the contract from her and scanned it quickly. It guaranteed that Corrine's life would be free of Kindred and that the Tremere clan's orders or actions would never see to my embrace. In return, I was to join the Inquisition and pass whatever information I could to a contact the Tremere clan would assign to me.

I closed my eyes and let the consequences of the contract sink in. The clan agreed not to kill me, as long as I signed over my soul. Could I go from killing every Kindred I saw to helping them? To living my life for the Tremere? If I wanted Corrine to live, it seemed I had no choice.

I signed the contract with my own blood next to Ford Radek's signature. Kate chanted softly in Latin for a few minutes, and my fate was sealed. I joined the Society the next day. They transferred me out of town, as I'd known they would, but it wasn't as far as it could have been. I could still come home and see Corrine, although not as often as I liked. Still, it was far better than the alternative.

Kate helped me make arrangements for the money to go into the accounts I'd set up for Corrine. It was blood money, but it would make sure she'd never want for anything in her life. It wouldn't be the same as being there to watch her grow up, but it was all I could do.

THE SOCIETY OF LEOPOLD

WELL I GUESS I'M JUST LIKE THEM NOW
I NEVER THOUGHT I'D TURN OUT LIKE THAT
TRY ME AGAIN - TRISHA YEARWOOD

Rich was more than happy to accept me into the Society. There was an opening in Bangor, which was closer than I'd hoped for. Things were hard for me at first, but I kept Corrine in the front of my mind and told myself I was doing this for her. I went to see her a lot and that helped.

Kate tried to worm her way back into my life, but I refused to let her. She was a vamp just like every other vamp I'd destroyed and while I wasn't planning on killing her, I just didn't want her around. A couple of times over the next ten years she tried to get close to me, but I kept telling her to leave me alone. Eventually I think she realized that she didn't have any kind of hold on me so she gave up, at least until I moved to Salem.

One thing I learned real quick in Bangor was that my ability to sense vamps was one not many hunters had. All I had to do was concentrate and I knew if there was a vamp nearby. It was hard to explain, but soon everyone started to believe I had a gut instinct for the monsters and started believing me when I said that one was getting close.

In the beginning I was only assigned to vamps, so that was nothing new for me. The biggest problem I had was the first time they sent me after a Garou. I had my doubts about whether or not I could do it. I wasn't sure I could kill this woman who to my knowledge had not really hurt anyone except an employee of a local branch of Pentex. From what I could tell, the guy had it coming.

But I knew the Society didn't hire me on to make moral decisions for them. A monster was a monster, and it didn't matter how good the bad guy was, she was still a bad buy. The Society killed bad guys, no matter how good they were.

So I tracked the girl and found out where she was staying. She must have been in town visiting friends or something, 'cause there were no other Garou there. I reported back like a good girl and the next night three of us went out on the hunt. I don't like to remember what happened next. I'd thought I could handle it, but I guess I thought wrong.

The hunt was successful, but killing the girl shook me up so badly that I could barely walk. One of the guys I was with had to carry me to the car and once we got back to the Cenaculum I barely said a word to anyone for days. There are some things you can't just take back, no matter how sorry you are, you know? I kept wondering what made my life more important than that poor woman I'd killed.

Could I do this? Could I really keep killing innocents just so my daughter could live? How in the hell was I supposed to live this way? I guess in the end it didn't matter how I was supposed to do it, just that I did. I knew that I was the only one around who could watch out for Corrine, and that if Mac were still alive he'd be pissed if I let her die. Of course, he'd also be pissed that I was working for the Society, but some thing you gotta live with, you know?

Eventually I learned how to use my anger toward vamps for killing other things. I never liked it, but the first kill was the hardest, and it did get easier. For real now, the Society is an equal opportunity exterminator; they kill every preternatural species. Fairies, witches, werewolves, vampires, everything you'd ever heard of, including ghosts. In my time I've killed or helped kill them all.

Those first few years in Bangor I spent a lot of time in Portland doing research at their library. It was a much bigger library, and the guy in charge was more likely to help me. One night that first fall I was visiting a new age shop when I got the distinct feeling someone was watching me. I reached out with my spider senses and knew that there was a vamp somewhere close.

Without being obvious, I glanced around. It was still hard for me to not go into slayer mode every time I felt a vamp nearby. It wasn't even the city I was assigned to, I had no idea what vamps were free targets and what ones I couldn't touch.

I never did see the vamp, but somehow I felt it knew me. I forgot about it only because that was the night I staked my contact. It was an accident, really. She snuck up on me and my first instinct was to strike. I apologized, but she made sure she was never alone with me after that and a few months later I was given a new contact.

My new contact was okay, at first. I got him all the information he asked for and he left me alone for the most part and let me do my job. After a while, though, the way he watched me got old. He wanted to bite me and we both knew it, but I didn't want to have anything to do with that kind of pain again.

In the spring of '92 the Society wanted to transfer me to Portland. I didn't like the idea, it was further away from Bar Harbor, but I knew I didn't really have a choice in the matter. I got a hold of my contact and he agreed to make the arrangements. A week later I was gone.

Portland was a lot like some of places I'd lived growing up. It was a big city and had all the problems cities are known for, not to mention the ones not so well known. Vamps ran wild through the streets and it was damned hard for me to keep track of who I could kill and who I couldn't.

I missed Corrine and hated being away from her so I went back to Bar Harbor as often as I could. We were almost inseparable when I was in town, talking about everything in her life, including her adoption. She didn't know I was her mother, but I think it helped her to have someone who'd been adopted, more or less. I mean, Linda wasn't my mother, so it was kinda like an adoption, you know?

Sometimes I'd tell her about things that had happened to me as a child, good things. I never told her the bad stuff about where I'd lived, and I never mentioned Kate. I told her a lot of things I'd never told anyone, but still there was a lot I didn't say. I didn't want to see the love in her eyes turn to hate when she found out what I really was.

What was I? Weak, that's what I was. If I was strong I would have sacrificed my child and destroyed every vamp I could have laid my hands on until they killed me. If I were strong, I'd tell the Society the truth about what I was doing and let them kill me. If I were strong I would have been able to get over Mac's death and found another man to love. I was too weak to let the vamps kill her, too weak to fight them, too weak to die, too weak to get on with my life.

My first contact in Portland was an idiot. For real now? I'm surprised his sire didn't kill him straight off instead of turn him into a blood-sucking fiend. I put up with him for almost six months before he pissed me off. My next contact was afraid of me, for some reason. I didn't understand why, it wasn't like I'd killed the first contact, just left him staked in the trunk of his car. He'd survived, hadn't he?

I played the spy game pretty good in Portland. I got along well with the others at the Cenaculum, and the woman who ran it. Well, mostly. She kept trying to set me up with other Inquisitors, but after a while she laid off. I think she started thinking I was gay or something.

Anyway, I liked Portland. It was big enough to get lost in, but small enough that I learned my way around pretty quickly. Once I got to know all the vamps, I even got to kill a few that weren't supposed to be in town. That part was fun.

Like anything else, my time in Portland didn't last long enough. It was just a matter of time before my contact got staked, she liked to touch me too much. I don't know what her problem was, but eventually I got tired of her cold hands on my skin at odd moments. After I explained to her I didn't like to be touched, I took the stake out. Yeah, it ruined her suit, but I could have cut off her head. God knows I wanted to. I wasn't in Portland much longer after that. It's hard to be a mole when no vamps want to be your contact.

RUNAWAY

CAN YOU KEEP THEM IN THE DARK FOR LIFE?

CAN YOU HIDE THEM FROM THE WAITING WORLD?

MOTHER - DANZIG

Everything changed when I got transferred to Manchester in December of 1995. Where Portland had only been about three hours from Bar Harbor, Manchester was more like five. It was harder for me to get back to see Corrine as often as I had, and I think she resented that.

She'd always been a good student, but her grades started dropping. Martina called me a few times and I'd go back to Bar Harbor and try to find out what was wrong. The thing was, Corrine wouldn't talk to me. She made it a point to be gone if she knew I was coming, and she quickly disappeared when she found out I was there.

It hurt more than I wanted to admit that she didn't want me around. Martina finally told me that it was a phase she was going through and that I should give her time to work it out. I tried, but it was one of the hardest things I've ever done to stay away from her like that.

Then in July, Martina called in a panic. I wasn't at the apartment so she left a message on the answering machine that made my blood run cold. Corrine had left the house early the day before saying she was going to spend the day in Bangor with one of her girlfriends, but she'd never come home and the girlfriend hadn't seen Corrine in weeks.

It took some fast-talking, but I was on my way home within hours. When I got to the farm a little after six that night Corrine had already been gone thirty hours.

Gene was very worried, but he trusted me to find Corrine. Martina took a little convincing because she was almost hysterical with fear over what might have happened to her. Gene told me that Corrine had been seen with Tommy Baker, and that was all the information I needed to start looking.

Tommy was Dennis' nephew but not a werewolf though the genes ran through him. He was kinfolk, and I knew that he ran with the pack that I used to hunt with. I went right to their house but they told me they had no idea where Tommy or Corrine was.

When I left there, I got a hold of a few other people I knew, and some of my daughter's friends. Near one in the morning the girl Corrine had said she was going to Bangor with finally admitted that Corrine and Tommy had been talking about getting married and that his family knew all about it.

The Bakers' weren't quite as friendly the second time I showed up on their doorstep, although I do have to admit it was probably because of my attitude. I demanded they tell me where Corrine was and I wouldn't take no for an answer. As much as I respected their family and pack, I needed to find my daughter.

Werewolves live by the same system normal wolves and dogs do. You have to prove your dominance through violence but once you do that everyone else listens to you and does what you say. Fear for Corrine and anger at their lies made me just strong and fast enough to beat every last one of them in one-to-one combat.

When the pack leader was on the floor with my silver plated knife at his throat, he finally told me where they had gone. I didn't like hearing that they would have been married today if they hadn't run into problems. I also didn't like learning that Corrine thought she was pregnant, but I let him go. I stood over his prone body and wiped the blood from my lip as I looked around the yard at the rest of the pack.

"Corrine Wright is under my protection," I told them firmly, sheathing the knife. "If any member of the pack wants to do more than say 'hey' on the street they have to talk to me first."

I didn't wait for a response, just turned and left. I got into my car and drove to Portland. When I stopped for gas, the attendant gave me a funny look. That was when I realized that I had a very fat lip and a black eye, and that there were scratches running down my left arm. Dimly I remembered that it had been one of the Kinfolk who had gone after me with her fingernails, so the scratches weren't that deep and probably wouldn't scar. Actually, they looked half healed already.

About an hour after sunrise I pulled into Portland. I followed the directions I'd been given to a house on the lower east side and parked at the end of the driveway. I knocked at the door and tried my best to be pleasant when a tall man answered the door. He was Garou.

"I hate to bother you this early," I said as politely as I could manage, "but I'm here to see Corrine and Tommy."

"They're not here," he told me gruffly.

I ran out of patience right there. "Step aside or I'll move you aside," I growled.

He looked me up and down and grinned like he didn't believe I could do it. Two seconds later he was lying on his back with a hand over the eye I'd just blackened.

"Tell me where she is," I demanded. "Her parents are worried about her and I'm here to take her home."

A woman walked through a doorway, took one look at my face, and pointed toward the stairs. As she bent over the man, I took the stairs three at a time.

I found them behind the first door I opened. Corrine was lying huddled against the wall with the blankets pulled up to her chin. Tommy was sprawled over most of the bed and I could tell by the way that the blankets fell over half his body that he was naked. I hoped Corrine wasn't.

Just seeing my daughter was enough to calm me down. I eased into the room and closed the door behind me. There was a chair in the corner and I sat down on it, grateful for the chance to rest for a few minutes. Between looking for Corrine, fighting half the Garou in Bar Harbor, and driving all night I was exhausted. It was enough for me to sit down and look at her.

What would we do if she really were pregnant? If she was then we'd deal with it. At least she had money to get by on, thanks to my contract with the Tremere, and unless Tommy was a complete jerk she had a guy to help her out. Not that I wanted to see her married to a Kinfolk who had more muscles than brains, but if that was what she wanted I'd back her all the way. I wanted so much more for her than that kind of life, but she was too old for me to be making that kind of choice for her.

I wondered what Mac would think about the situation, if he'd blame me for it. It was my fault, wasn't it? I hadn't been there to watch out for her. If I had been, Tommy would have been sent on his way before he'd gotten in her pants.

Watching them sleep was only making my shoulders even more tense. Finally I knocked a book off the dresser just to see what would happen.

Tommy jumped up right away buck-naked, ready for danger. He seemed very surprised to see me. Corrine was a little slower to wake up. She rubbed her eyes and asked Tommy what was wrong.

He was too concerned about me to answer her. "E-Eliza," he stammered, reaching for his pants. "What are you doing here?"

Corrine stopped in mid rub and opened her eyes in surprise.

"Wondering the same thing about you two," I told him as he pulled on his pants.

Corrine sat up and held the blanket to her chest as if that would protect her from me. She pulled her knees up and sat back against the wall, not looking at either of us.

"We were-we were ah...."

He didn't seem to be able to finish the sentence so I did it for him. "Doing something stupid?"

"Uh, no," he protested, glancing at Corrine, "we were just—"

"Tommy," I said with the last of my patience, "be a good boy and wait in the hall for me."

"Ok," he said quickly. With a last apologetic look at Corrine he beat it.

I sat there for a long moment looking at my daughter. If this was what she really wanted, how could I stand in her way? On the other hand, how could I not try to stop her from making what I believed would be the biggest mistake of her life? But for real now, there was only one question I could ask her. "Are you pregnant?"

She closed her eyes and grimaced, but to my great relief, she shook her head no.

"But you thought you were."

She nodded.

I told myself that this wasn't over yet. "Do you want to marry him?" When she shrugged, I said, "That'd be a 'no'."

She closed her eyes and turned away, but I thought I saw relief on her face.

I had to do something to get through to her, something drastic. After a long moment I stood up. "Get dressed, we're going for a drive. Meet me downstairs."

Tommy was in the hall like I told him to be, dressed only in tattered jeans and looking like he might run at any second. I can't tell you how good that made me feel. "Follow me," I said briskly as I led the way downstairs.

We passed Dion on the way out, but he didn't try to stop us. Smart move on his part, I wanted nothing more than to beat the shit out of somebody. When I reached the driveway I turned around and looked at Tommy.

"She's pregnant," he blurted out before I could say anything. "We need to get married."

How could I put this delicately? "Sometimes girls are just late," I told him. "If she really is, we'll let you know. In the meantime, I just fought my way through your pack." I stepped closer to him, invading his space to the hilt. The time for delicacy was way over, it was time for something I was much better at: intimidation. "I won. Stay away from her."

Tommy's eyes got real big and his shock showed quite clearly on his face. He wasn't a small boy, but there were plenty of guys in his pack that were a lot bigger than he was, especially when they shifted to big-furry form. If I'd beaten them all, I'd have no problem kicking the shit out of him and he knew it.

I wasn't tall enough to see over his shoulder, but I heard the screen door close and knew that Corrine had followed us out. I watched her walk closer to us. She had obviously just thrown on jeans and pulled her hair back in a ponytail, and she was clutching her bag as if her life depended on it. She looked lost.

"Get in the car," I told her gently.

She glanced apologetically to Tommy, but she did what I'd said.

I turned back to Tommy. "Are we clear?" I asked in a harsh voice.

"Yeah," he whispered anxiously. "We're clear."

Without another word I went to the car and got in. I drove to the nearest fast food place and got us breakfast, then headed for the highway. I wasn't sure what I could do to break through this wall that had sprung up between us, but I knew it had to be something drastic.

After a few minutes I realized that Corrine looked almost as frightened as Tommy had, and that she wasn't eating. In fact, when I told her to eat, she jumped at the sound of my voice. Very slowly she put her straw in the drink and took a sip then broke off a piece of hash brown and nibbled at it.

I sighed. As much as intimidation worked well for me with everyone else, I honestly didn't want that kind of relationship with my daughter. It was all I could do not to break down in tears right there in the car. I wished Mac were there because I knew he'd know what to do to make everything all right again.

I pointed the car south and drove, not quite sure where I was heading. A part of me wanted to go back to the mountain where I'd waited for Mac, another part of me wanted to show her Baltimore where I'd been so happy with him. In the end I didn't take her to either of those places simply because I knew I wouldn't be able to stand the memories.

Around noon I stopped for gas and watched Corrine go inside to use the bathroom. We hadn't spoken since we'd gotten in the car and it didn't look like we'd be chatting any time soon. Lunch was from another fast food place, and within ten minutes we were back on the highway.

We ended up in New York in one of the neighborhoods I remembered living in when I was little. Of course it had changed, a lot, since I'd lived there. It was much, much worse. The buildings were mostly empty, but a lot of them had been torn down and the rubble lay where it had fallen. Homeless people littered the area and every now and then I caught a glimpse of what looked like gangs roaming the streets.

I pulled into what had once been the parking lot of our building and turned off the car. Corrine looked around, her eyes wide, but she still didn't say anything.

"Have you ever been anywhere like this?" I asked softly as I looked at the battlefield I had once called home.

"No," she whispered.

I glanced at her but she was looking out the window. "Do you know where we are?"

"New York." It wasn't a hard guess.

"We're in the worst neighborhood that New York has to offer," I clarified with a grim smile. "This is a war zone."

She just kept looking out the window without saying anything.

"People die here every day," I told her bluntly. "Would you live here with Tommy if he asked you to?"

She looked down and shook her head no. It broke my heart to see the tears falling down her cheeks, but knew I had to get through to her somehow.

"Do you love him?" I asked softly.

"I thought I did," she whispered.

I was so relieved to hear that. "But you're not sure."

She sat there crying and didn't answer me.

What could I do that could show her what love, true love, was really like? What could I say to make her understand what it had been like for me and Mac? I sighed looking out at the battle zone and suddenly I knew what to say. I turned to her but I saw only Mac as I'd seen him that first night in Baltimore.

"When you find someone that you love so much that you would live in this place if he asked you to, then you know it's real, Corrine," I said firmly. "Until then, don't settle."

Sobs tore through her at that, and she sniffled, trying to hold them in. I reached for her and she jumped, almost as if she was afraid I was going to hit her. I ignored her movements and pulled her into my arms. We cried together, Corrine openly sobbing while I fought the tears that streamed down my face and fell into her hair.

I hadn't let myself think of Mac for so long and remembering what it had been like for us was still so painful for me. To have had that much happiness for so short a time and to lose it to the vamps was so wrong. The only thing I had to console myself with was right here in my arms and she resented the hell out of me.

A long time later we stopped crying. We used leftover napkins from lunch to dry our eyes and blow our noses then we sat awkwardly in silence.

I pointed to the ruined building we were parked next to. "I used to live here a long time ago," I said softly, "when I was really young." I had tried to plant flowers in a dirt patch in front of the building, but Linda had found out and poured drain cleaner over them.

Corrine looked up in surprise, almost in shock.

"It wasn't this bad," I assured her, "but it was still... bad. I spent most of my childhood in places like this. It's something I hoped you'd never have to see. I'm so afraid that if you end up with somebody like Tommy, your life will be like this place, a war zone." Garou weren't known for their peaceful lives.

She wasn't ready to hear this from me, I could tell. There was an open look of defiance on her face and she was glaring out the window.

"You think I don't know what I'm talking about? You think I haven't been there?" I'd been to worse places than I hoped she would ever see in her lifetime. It was time to tell her about some of them. "When I was seventeen I ran away from home. I met this guy in Charleston, Eddie. He reminds me a lot of Tommy. He was gorgeous but stupid." I shook my head, remembering just how reckless I'd been. "Of course so was I. It ended badly."

She didn't say anything, but I could tell she was a little surprised to hear that I'd run away.

I looked back out the window, but again all I saw was Mac. "Then I met this guy. He was—" How could I explain to her what Mac had been like? "He wasn't like anyone I'd ever met and I didn't think—" My voice broke and I had to clear my throat before I could go on. "I didn't think I was good enough for him. I was wild, he wasn't."

Corrine was listening now although she was trying to pretend she wasn't.

Tears fell down my cheeks and there was nothing I could do to stop them. I knew that if I didn't finish saying what I needed to say quickly, I wouldn't be able to before they overwhelmed me. "If he'd have asked me to, I would have lived here with him, even now, even as bad as it is." God, if Mac were alive, I'd live with him even at the mouth of hell itself.

"You mean more to me than anyone ever has," I told her honestly, still fighting the tears, "even that guy."

Confusion and astonishment played across her face before she turned away to stare out the window. "Oh sure," she mumbled accusingly, "and that's why you left?"

I closed my eyes at the pain that washed over me. I had known this was entirely my fault, I'd known that she hadn't understood when I'd been transferred so far away from her. Ever since the move she'd been colder and colder to me. What could I do? I wasn't about to tell her that she was the real reason I'd left Maine, she would never understand.

For the first time in years I completely lost control of the grief inside of me. I buried my face in my hands and cried like I hadn't cried since Mac had died. I let the pain and regret wash over me, through me, and wondered what I could have done differently to stop us from coming to this.

"I'm sorry," Corrine whispered after a few minutes. She sounded confused, but there was still a hint of an attitude in her voice. "I'm sure there's a really good reason for you to leave."

I took deep breaths to try and control myself. When I finally did, I dried my face and glanced at her but she was still looking away.

"I have a certain responsibility, Corrine," I said softly, my voice still catching from the crying jag. "I didn't really have a choice about leaving. You may not believe that but it's true. I can't really explain it to you, but I swear that if I could I'd be living in Bar Harbor."

"Yeah," she scoffed. The attitude was back in full force. "Look, I'm sorry I worried everyone, I'm sure that mom and dad are freaking, and I'm sorry I caused this big mess," she said in a rush. "I'll be more careful in the future and this won't happen again. Can I please go home now?"

I knew that I wasn't getting through to her this way. I felt helpless in the face of her anger because I couldn't really defend myself in her eyes. I had left her, and she obviously thought that I was rejecting her.

"Okay, I'll take you home," I told her, trying to think quickly. Maybe if she saw some of the legitimate things I did while working for the Society that would help. "We just have one stop to make first."

I started the car and drove until we came to a better neighborhood. It wasn't much better, but at least I felt that we could get out of the car without being attacked. I found a homeless shelter and parked in the alley. I knew she didn't understand why I was stopping there, but I hoped it would become clear here shortly.

"Get out," I told her as I opened the door. "Let's go."

She got out reluctantly and waited for me to lock the doors before she followed me back toward the street. We went inside the shelter and it was everything I expected it to be.

The main room was large and filled with people in various stages of poverty. Most of their clothes were worn and some were very dirty. The smell of unwashed bodies was almost overwhelming. There were a lot of children running around, but most of them stayed close to their parents. All of the kids had fear in their eyes.

Corrine looked around wide-eyed, not sure what to make of it all.

"Do you have any idea what I do?" I asked her.

"Not really."

"I work at a place like this." It wasn't quite this bad, but at times it was close.

She looked around again, seeing it a little bit differently this time.

"We help people get food, find shelter, learn how to read," I told her. "You have all those things, Corrine. You don't need me to baby you. It's people like this who need me more than you do." What I couldn't say was that I also protected people like this from the monsters of the world while Corrine was already protected from those monsters by my contract.

I was disappointed to see a resentful look cross her face. She was just a teenager, after all, and she didn't understand why she couldn't come first in my life. She didn't care how these people had come to be here in the place, she just wanted them to stand on their own and leave me alone so I could be with her.

With a sigh I led her over to an older woman. Corrine listened while I started talking to the woman, but she didn't say anything. I talked to two or three people, hearing the same hard luck stories I'd heard a hundred times about how they had come to be living on the streets.

I had hoped that hearing their stories would touch Corrine's heart, help her understand why it was important to help people like this, but she didn't seem to care. In fact after a while she was standing with her arms crossed tapping her foot impatiently.

Finally I took her back out to the car and we got in. "Is there anything you always wanted to see in New York?" I asked, hoping that if we could do something together she might come around.

She looked down at her lap. "I just want to go see my dad."

I couldn't help but think about Mac when she said that, even though I knew she was talking about Gene. I hid the arrow of pain that shot through me and started the car.

We had another silent trip back to Maine. I stopped once for food and gas, but I didn't try to talk any more sense into her. I'd been up for almost thirty-eight hours by the time I pulled off the highway in Bangor heading south to Bar Harbor.

The closer we got to the Wright's farm, the more nervous Corrine got. She started playing with the hem of her shirt and glancing at me a lot. I figured she was worried about what I'd told her parents, but she didn't say anything.

When I turned down the road they lived on, I glanced at her. "Having second thoughts about going home?"

She swallowed anxiously. "Did you tell them why I left?"

I knew it. "No," I assured her gently. "That's up to you to tell them if you want to." When she sighed in relief, I added, "For that matter, I didn't tell them who you were with, or where, or why."

She looked down at her hands and quietly thanked me as I pulled in the driveway.

As soon as I turned off the car, I saw the curtain on the front door move and Gene look out with Martina right behind him. When he saw it was us, Gene came out onto the porch and waited. Martina stayed in the doorway, an expression of hope on her face.

"You know they love you," I told her, "no matter what you've done, or haven't done." The Wrights had been good parents to Corrine and I hated to see them so worried about her.

Corrine looked down at her hands and took a deep shaky breath. After a minute she wiped the tears from her cheeks and got out of the car. She started running straight into Gene's arms. He gathered her close and swung her around, so happy to see her that there were tears on his cheeks.

I sat in the car and felt my own tears stream down my face as I watched Martina come out and join the circle of their family. I wanted so badly for that to be Mac and me greeting Corrine that I could taste it. I hated that he was gone, that we would never be together again,

never watch our daughter grow up. I knew if he could see her that he'd love her even more than I did.

Suddenly I realized that Corrine had seen the longing I hadn't tried to hide on my face. She held her hand out to me and I reached up to dry my tears. Maybe the trip to New York had done some good after all, maybe she did understand how much I loved her. I got out of the car, wanting to run to her like she had run to Gene, but I forced myself to walk. I took her hand and was pulled into the group hug.

As soon as Martina recovered herself a little, she started asking if Corrine was hungry, or if she wanted her to run a bath for her.

"She looks tired," Gene said softly as Martina led us inside. "Maybe she would rather go to bed. We can talk about this tomorrow if she wants to."

Corrine nodded and hugged him, still holding my hand. She turned to hug and kiss Martina, then looked at me. "Will you stay the night?"

"I had planned on staying here while I'm in town," I told her. I had two weeks before I was due back in Manchester and I intended on spending every minute of them with Corrine.

"Will you sleep with me?" she asked softly.

That surprised me. Once when she was very little she'd talked me into spending the night with her, but that had been the only time since she was an infant that I had stayed in the same room with her. "If that's what you want, Corrine."

I said goodnight to the Wrights and went upstairs still holding my daughter's hand. When we got to her room she finally let go. She took her pants off and climbed into bed still wearing the tee shirt and shorts she'd been wearing when I'd found her that morning.

"There's shorts and tee shirts in the dresser," she told me.

Her room looked a lot different from what it had been when I'd come back for Easter. Her dog curios weren't the neat collection I remembered, they had a neglected look to them. There were even other things on the shelves Gene had built for them, which I'd never seen before. The top of the dresser had gothic make up scattered on it, and dark clothing littered the floor of the room.

I ignored the uncharacteristic mess and changed into a pair of shorts. I didn't want her to see the scars on my body or the ring on its chain so I slept in the shirt I'd been wearing when I'd gotten Martina's call yesterday morning.

Even though I was tired, I laid down next to Corrine and watched her fall asleep. She looked so much like Mac that I wanted to cry again. I reached over and smoothed the hair from her face knowing that she was worth every heartache that I'd ever had. Even Mac's death was tolerable because if we'd never been together, I would never have had Corrine.

"I would die if anything happened to you," I whispered to her.

In her sleep she took my hand and cradled it to her chest. It took me a long time to fall asleep, and when I did I dreamed of Mac.

I spent the next two weeks in Bar Harbor and every minute of them I was with Corrine. She went from being clingy one minute to cold as ice the next, but she wouldn't let me out of her sight. It was wicked obvious that she was still angry with me, but I hoped she'd get over it in time.

I didn't want to leave when my two weeks were up. I knew that Corrine needed me, maybe now more than ever, but I couldn't just walk out on my contract. She was really

surprised when I left her the number of my apartment, something I'd never done before. I wanted her to be able to call me if she needed me.

When I went back to Manchester, I made sure I called her at least once a week. It meant having less money to live on, but what was that when my daughter needed me? I also wrote her as often as I could, even though I'd never been one for writing letters. And I made sure I made it back to Bar Harbor at least once a month.

I kept all the letters she sent me in a storage locker just out of town. I knew I was being paranoid, but I didn't want anyone to find out about Corrine and go after her. The others at the Cenaculum realized that I had something going on the side, but since it didn't effect my slaying, they never tried to stop it. Like they could have, you know?

"Gina!" I was too far away, I'd never make it in time. I didn't care if the vamp was the primogen's favorite childe, if she killed Gina, I'd destroy her.

"Eliza," I heard Gina call just before she passed out from the blood loss.

Rage filled me and I lost control. When I finally reached the vamp, she threw Gina's body at me to try and slow me down. It didn't even faze me. In my frenzied state, I forgot about the stake in my hand until I used it to carve open the vamp's chest. She screamed in pain, but a downward stroke of the stake silenced her.

With my bare hands I ripped her head from her body and threw it across the room. I barely realized that the other hunters were watching me in awe as I tore the rest of the body limb from limb.

When I was satisfied the vamp was dead I sat down in the middle of the carnage and cradled Gina's body. She'd been too young, too naïve to be a hunter. Her hesitation had cost her life and I mourned for her as if she were my own child.

The other hunters told Father Thomas that I was a berzerker. They admired me, can you believe it? They wished they could lose control like that and tear the enemy apart. None of them understood my shame over the incident.

Despite the respect my frenzy had earned in the Society, the Tremere were pissed. I think the primogen would have killed me himself if Ford hadn't stepped in. I told the Society that I needed a change of scenery and they transferred me to Burlington, Vermont.

VENGEANCE

YOU EAT ME UP I'M LIKE A HOT PEPPER AND YOU MIGHT GET BURNED
YOU TOOK A TURN FOR THE WORST
WALKED UP IN MY FACE RODE AWAY IN A HEARSE
WHERE U AT ROCK - KID ROCK

The fall colors in Vermont were beautiful, but I missed my daughter. The local Regent decided that I'd been given too much freedom in the other cities I'd lived in and proceeded to take away every thing I lived for. He forbade me to visit Corrine. Of course, I still went whenever I could. He hated it, but for a long time he couldn't prove it or do anything about it.

Corrine moved to Salem in June to get ready for college in the fall. I tried going through the normal channels to get permission to help her, but Luther wouldn't give it. I hadn't been back to Bar Harbor since Christmas and I missed her more than I could stand. I therefore went anyway.

I tried not to worry about what would happen when I got back to Burlington, but it was hard not to. I knew my going wouldn't affect my contract, but I thought there would probably be some type of consequence for my leaving without permission.

Corrine picked up on my nervousness, but she thought I was worried about her moving so far away from home. She assured me that she'd be all right and I knew that she would be simply because Ford Radek lived in Salem. What better place for Corrine to be than where he was?

She'd found this great economy apartment near downtown that was everything she'd wanted. It had a big kitchen area and large windows, and it felt good to see how much she loved it. Gene, Martina and I helped her unpack some of her things, but I knew I couldn't stay for long. I spent a long weekend with my daughter and kissed her goodbye with no regrets.

When I got back to Burlington, my contact was waiting for me at my apartment. She told me that Luther had ordered my presence at the chantry. I knew something was up and almost refused, but seeing Corrine again had renewed my resolve to keep her safe. My contact hid me in the back of a delivery truck and took me inside the chantry.

Looking back at that night logically I'd have to say that I should never have gone so willingly, and definitely not unarmed. For real now? I know I'd have gone anyway just to know that Corrine was safe.

As soon as the truck doors opened, four strong ghouls grabbed my arms and legs and carried me kicking and fighting to a basement room where Luther was waiting. There were chains hanging from the ceiling and they brushed against my body as the ghouls laid me on a stainless steel table and chained me down on it. No matter how hard I fought, I couldn't get free.

"You've been a bad girl," Luther said softly from the foot of the table.

I stopped struggling and glared at him.

"I've told you not to leave Burlington without my permission," he continued as the ghouls stepped back and he walked toward my head. "You seem to be having a hard time listening."

"The contract doesn't say anything about me being your slave," I growled at him. "What the hell do you think you are doing?"

He smiled evilly. "I'm going to punish you, mole," he told me, pleasure oozing from his voice. He picked up a large knife and handed it to one of his boys. "I am the one who will

interpret the meaning of your contract. You will obey me, or you will be brought here for punishment.”

The look in his eyes made me afraid, more afraid than I'd been since I'd seen that car coming straight for Corrine. I tried to swallow my fear even as the ghoul started cutting my clothes off. I knew Luther would thrive on it and I didn't want to give him the satisfaction of seeing my terror. I had to live through whatever he was going to do to me or Corrine would be left alone, unprotected. I swore to myself that when I got out of this, I'd find a way to kill him.

He kept me in that dungeon for two days and nights, alternating between torturing me himself and letting his puppies have me. He probably would have kept me longer but I think he was afraid that the Society would miss me.

At first I tried to keep my wits about me, but it was hard with his teeth sinking into my flesh. His fangs burned my skin, and tore into my soul. I don't know what was worse, his feeding from me or what he let the ghouls do.

When Mac died I'd lost all interest in the opposite sex but by the time Luther's puppies were done, I swore I'd never let a man near me again. I won't go into details about what all happened. I ended up with a few more scars, let's just leave it at that and call it done.

But through the whole time Luther kept telling me that it was my fault it was happening. That if I'd just been a good girl, he wouldn't have to punish me like this. And he was right, you know? If I hadn't been so trusting to go to the chantry with my contact, if I hadn't needed to see Corrine so badly, if I'd just stayed in town like he'd told me to, hell, if I'd never signed the damn contract in the first place this wouldn't have happened.

For real now? Luther's punishment was just repayment for what I'd been doing the last ten years. You can't live the kind of life I have and not expect to have bad things happen to you. In the end you get what you deserve. This was my life of sin revisited on me.

I got through it only by thinking about Baltimore, and Mac, and Corrine. I knew Mac would have wanted me to survive no matter what happened to protect our daughter so that's what I did. I limped away from the chantry alive and with a plan to kill them all, that was the only thing that mattered to me.

Less than a week later, Luther and his buddies were driving home from one of Burlington's elite clubs when their car was sent down a handy detour right into a bunch of Inquisitors. It gave me great satisfaction to open the back door of that limousine and pour the gasoline onto the seat around him. I'd wanted to be the one to stake him, but someone else had beaten me to that pleasure. At least I got to light the match.

I made sure one of his ghouls got away, but not before I told him there hadn't been anything I could do to stop the hit. I also whispered in his ear that I'd kill him just like I'd killed his master if he didn't get his ass to Salem. I made sure that he'd tell Ford Radek exactly what had happened during those forty-eight hours I was held in the chantry dungeon and hoped that it would matter to him.

To my surprise, when I went to my apartment a few nights later Radek himself was waiting for me. I'd met him a few times over the years, and since he was the guy whose signature guaranteed Corrine's safety, I trusted him more than I trusted any vampire. I put away my stake and offered him the ripped beanbag that was my only chair. He ignored it and stood in the center of the room looking at me for a long time.

"I am not happy that I had to come here," he told me harshly at last. "Travel is not safe for those of my kind, as I'm sure you are aware."

"I didn't ask you to come, sir," I said as respectfully as I could manage given the circumstances.

"If I hadn't come, you would be dead right now." He sighed and walked over to look out the cracked window at the street. "Half the Tremere in the chantry are calling for your death. I had to send two of them to Vienna for 'training'."

What was I supposed to say, 'Gee, I'm sorry I burned the primogen to a crisp?' I wasn't sorry, I'd never be sorry, and I wasn't about to apologize. "It was a planned Society hit," I told him. "I couldn't stop it."

"Is that a fact?"

"Yes." It was. Once I'd planned and implemented the hit through the Society, there was no way I could stop it.

"Be that as it may, Luther crossed the line," Radek admitted in a tight voice. "He was born in a time when women were chattel to be used at a powerful man's whim. I'm afraid his servants felt the same way. They didn't change when the world changed around them."

I wanted to ask when Radek was born, but it really wasn't any of my business. He was a vamp, but oddly enough I respected him. I couldn't even wish him destroyed because he was the only thing standing between Corrine and the Kindred.

"No one here will agree to work with you," he told me.

That didn't really surprise me. If you knew that I brutally and vindictively killed your boss, would you work with me? Not bloody likely.

"In fact, I have been unable to convince any Regent on the East Coast to take you on," he added.

I cursed and looked away; if no one on the coast would take me that meant I'd have to transfer elsewhere, somewhere that I wouldn't be able to see Corrine. I wasn't stupid enough to think I'd get out of my contract that easily.

"I've reviewed the matter and it appears that you work best when the Item is close by," he said kindly.

I looked up to see him watching me.

"I believe you prefer to look over her," he continued, "that you don't trust anyone to keep her safe except yourself."

"That's not true," I protested honestly. "I believe you will keep her safe." If anything happened to Corrine, his life was forfeit.

"Yes," he agreed with a wry smile. "I don't know if you were aware of this, but I am the chantry Regent in Salem. If you were to transfer there, you would be able to oversee the Item at your convenience, as long as it didn't interfere with your contract."

At first I didn't understand what he was saying but then I got it. He was telling me that I'd be able to live in the same town as my daughter for the first time in almost ten years. "Are you serious?"

"Do I look like I'm jesting?" He really didn't.

I grinned and for a split second he looked stunned.

"Shall I make arrangements on my end for your contact?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," I said happily. "I'm sure I won't have any problem transferring."

"It actually works out very well for me," he told me. "It's been some time since we had a mole in St. Stephen's. The last one is now my grandchilde."

I didn't care about that; the only thing that mattered was that I would be close to Corrine again.

"I can see that your mind is not on our conversation," he said simply. "Perhaps you were not aware of this, but Kate Hepburn is also living in Salem."

Those words brought me back down to earth in a hurry. "Kate?" I hadn't talked to her in a long time. What was she doing living in Salem?

"She isn't using that name," he told me, "but she has been in town for a number of years now. Since you know her, perhaps you be less likely to stake her." When I nodded, he added, "You realize that Salem is your last chance, don't you? There will be no relocation, no second chances. If you can't follow my rules, it ends here. The council would not be as lenient on you as what you have seen until now."

If he called Luther's 'punishment' lenient, I hated to see what the Ford would do. "I understand," I said seriously. "I will do my best, sir." And I would; my life wasn't important but I didn't even want to think about what might happen to Corrine if I wasn't there to make sure she was safe.

SALEM

WHAT AM I WAITING FOR?

WHAT AM I WAITING FOR?

TIME BOMB - GODSMACK

I found a place ten minutes from Corrine's apartment and not too far from St. Stephen's, the Society of Leopold's house in Salem. The apartment wasn't anything special, but it was someplace to crash when I needed to be alone, and it gave me somewhere to keep the answering machine I needed to have for Kate to get a hold of me.

I talked to the prince a few times on the phone, usually when I had an emergency and couldn't get a hold of Kate. Her name was Elvira Van Dorn and she warned me that there would be no 'foolishness' in Salem as there had been elsewhere. I assured her there wouldn't be and I meant it, mostly because I couldn't risk losing the clan's protection for Corrine.

She gave me the name of another Tremere I could contact with information if I needed to, but warned me not to go into detail about the 'agreement' I had with the clan. I guess Ford didn't want to advertise the fact that he had a vulnerability that could be used against him. For real now, if I was his enemy and knew that he'd have to die if anything happened to Corrine, I'd be sure to use that to my advantage.

Kate was in her glory thinking she had me at her beck and call. It didn't take me long to set her straight, and when I did she was pissed. I had to deal with her because that was the arrangement, but neither of us liked it much. I knew she was using an alias, but she wouldn't tell me what it was. It took me almost a month to figure out exactly where she was staying, but I didn't let her know I knew.

The vamps in town were the same as vamps anywhere. Any of them that looked too closely at me thought I was a ghoul and I'd stopped trying to correct those a long time ago. Only one of them gave me real problems, and I took care of him quick enough.

He was Brujah, which meant he had more muscle and speed than brains. I caught him following me around town a couple of times but I lost him pretty quickly. Then one night I was walking on one of the piers near dawn and didn't feel him coming until it was too late. My only way around him was to fight or swim and I really didn't want to get wet.

I tried playing stupid, but he didn't buy it for long. When I tried to get past him he was just fast enough to catch me. He dragged me kicking and fighting over to the edge of a nearby warehouse telling me the whole time to relax, that I'd enjoy it. I knew better.

Memories of Luther's punishment kept ripping through my mind and I had a hard time concentrating on the here and now. I haven't tasted fear in my mouth too many times in my life, but that was one of them.

The instant he sunk his fangs into me I snapped out of it. My hands found a stake and I drove it through his chest and pulled away from him. His teeth tore through the skin of my neck on the way out and I knew I'd have a hell of a scar. He fell to the ground, lifeless.

I stood over him for the longest time with blood trickling down my neck. I wanted to kill him, but he was one of Salem's five known Brujah. Destroying him would mean going against Ford's explicit instructions. I wasn't supposed to kill any vamp without orders coming through my contract unless it meant blowing my cover with the Society.

What was I supposed to do? The sun would be up soon so I couldn't just leave him there, but I wasn't about to let him go. I dragged him inside the warehouse and made a quick phone

call to the prince's house. I let the puppy who answered the phone know where I was leaving the bastard and went back to my apartment.

It took some doing to hide the bite from my co-workers at St. Stephen's, but I managed. Even harder was hiding it from Corrine. When she noticed the bandage under my high collar, I told her that one of the children who came into the church had bitten me. She looked at me funny, but she didn't push it.

Corrine was happy I was living in the same town with her again, but not as happy as I was. I mean, I couldn't spend as much time as I wanted to with her, but at least I could keep an eye on her, make sure she stayed safe. Sometimes it felt like I had a normal life, you know? Like I'd never signed the contract and I was free to live life the way I wanted to.

Soon I was going to her apartment every Sunday night for dinner. She's a good cook, which she definitely didn't get from me. Martina had tried to teach me, but I guess I'm better at destroying things than fixing them because her lessons never took.

When we started spending more time together, I think she realized how limited my budget was. She kept trying to give me money, but I didn't want it. How could I explain to her that I could have had all the money I ever wanted, but that she was more important? That would bring up too many questions about what I did and where her trust fund came from and I didn't want that. I didn't want her money, either.

St. Stephen's was just like any other Cenaculum I'd stayed at. Most of the people seemed overzealous and over worked, but everyone lived for the greater purpose; eliminating the supernatural. I tried not to wonder what they would do if they found out I was one.

A few of the guys seemed interested in dating me, but I set them straight quick enough. I don't date, ever. No man in this world could compare to Mac Brennan and there's nothing I can do to change that.

The change of scenery hadn't change anything in my heart. I still dreamed about Mac from time to time, still wished he were with me. I would have given anything for him to see Corrine and the way she was growing up. I knew he'd be proud of her.

It was strange though. Here I was, a few months shy of twenty years alone, and I still couldn't look at anyone else and think about what it would be like to be with them. Oh, I know that what had happened in Burlington didn't help matters, but even before then I can remember thinking that I'd be alone the rest of my life.

The thing was, I didn't feel like I was alone. I still found myself thinking of things to tell Mac and wanting to cry when I remembered he wasn't around to tell them to.

I didn't relive the raid in my dreams as much as I used to, but I did still dream about that night in Baltimore, the night my life shattered. I kept trying to tell myself that it didn't matter any more, but I knew it was a lie.

One night I was walking through the streets of Salem toward a house Charity thought a Changeling lived at. I was supposed to scout out the house and see if there were any signs like fairy rings or something like that. Like they advertise or something, I honestly don't know what she was thinking.

So anyway, I was walking down the street about an hour after sundown and I saw this car coming down the street. I wouldn't have paid it any attention, but since it was dark I had my feelers out and I could feel that there were vamps in the car, but that wasn't what threw me.

I saw the driver first off. He was a fairly good-looking man for a vamp, I guess. There was a woman sitting next to him who was turned around to talk to the men in the back seat. I

didn't really notice the third person in the car, but the quick glimpse I had of the fourth man made me stop and stare after the car.

Several long minutes later I shook myself and headed down an alley. I sat down at the base of a fence and buried my head in my hands. I was going insane, that was the only explanation. After all these years, I was finally losing my mind.

There was no way I'd really seen what I'd thought I'd seen. No way. Mac was dead and if he weren't, he sure as hell wouldn't be in a car full of vamps. If he weren't dead he'd have met me on the mountain twenty years ago, I know he would have. We'd sworn to meet there no matter what.

For real now, that hadn't been the first time I'd ever turned around and for just a moment thought I'd seen him there. Hell, I knew it was crazy, but sometimes when I was alone I still talked to him like he was standing right next to me. But this time he had just seemed so real.

It took me a while, but I finally got myself together enough so that I felt like I could walk without falling on my face. Instead of scouting out the house I'd been sent to spy on, I went back to my apartment.

I looked around at the bare rooms and remembered how happy I'd been to furnish our apartment in Baltimore. I laid down on the beanbag with my head on my arm and stared at the only picture I had of the two of us together. If I closed my eyes I knew I could feel his hands on me, his lips pressed to mine.

Damn, it was way past time for me to get over this. Mac was dead, and he'd always be dead and no figment of my overactive imagination would change that, ever. I had to get over it or go crazy and I seriously didn't think I'd be able to protect Corrine from a mental institution.

I laid down on the mattress that served as a bed and tried to sleep. I reached out and touched the space beside me where Mac would have slept if he were alive. If I pretended real hard, I could imagine the spot was warm and that he'd just gotten out of bed. If I closed my eyes and tried hard enough, I could almost smell him on the sheets.

What would he think if he could see me now? Would he hate me for the things I did to keep our child safe? Would he blame me for his death? I think he would at least be very disappointed that I hadn't fought the vamps to my own death.

And you know, I had to wonder if we'd still be together if the vamps hadn't raided our apartment. Maybe our love would have died a quiet death just like everyone else's seems to now days. Maybe he would have gotten tired of killing vampires. Maybe I would have. There was nothing to say that we would have still been together, was there?

No, there wasn't anything that told me Mac and I would have made it. Just every beat of my heart, every breath I take. I've only loved two people in my life. One died on me, and the other one I watch over the best I can. I can't imagine it ever being any different.

So I lie in the bed that I've made and watch the sky lighten through the window. I try not to think of the blood on my hands or the deaths on my conscience. Instead I remember the dark hair and handsome face that once smiled at me with love. I think about what it was like to live with him, to love him, and I wait.

I don't know what I'm waiting for. Maybe for the night I finally don't make it back from one of the hunts the Society sends me on. Maybe for Corrine to grow old and die so that I can just walk off into the night. Or maybe I'm waiting for my heart to finally mend so I can finally get over losing Mac and get on with my life. Yeah, like that's going to happen any time soon.

Screw this waiting crap.