



ELIZA: WALKING IN THE LIGHT

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GALWAY

YOUR EYES KEEP THINGS WELL HIDDEN
JUST A HINT OF WHAT
YOU'RE HOLDING INSIDE
BLIND FAITH — WARRANT

I found myself in a farmyard between a Victorian house on my left and a large barn on my right. There were two motorcycles parked near the house, and an older car near the barn. It was dark and by the position of the moon in the sky it was several hours later here than it had been in Boston.

There was only one light on in the house and I walked toward it, searching the darkness for any sign of vampires or other dangers. I wondered if the Brennans had wards on the property, and hoped that they didn't have any going on against ghouls.

It didn't look like anyone was up and I thought about bedding down on the bench that stood on the porch underneath a bay window. As I got close to the steps I heard a low growling coming from the direction of the barn. It sounded too big to be a dog, and I knew the Brennans were close to the local Garou. I stopped instantly and put my free hand up, palm out. I didn't want to appear in any way threatening. A moment later a howl split the night. I waited.

Another light went on inside, followed quickly by the porch light. I looked away to avoid being blinded by it, and when my eyes adjusted I saw a man standing in the open doorway. He was wearing slacks and a white tee shirt, but his feet were bare and it looked like he'd just gotten out of bed.

To my right I could see a large Irish wolfhound standing about four feet away from me. It was watching me intently and its eyes shone with intelligence. I knew even without looking at its aura that it was Garou. It was too close for me to do anything but hope it didn't attack.

I looked back at the man and gave him what I hoped was a friendly smile. "Hello," I said politely. "Is Corrine Wright here? Glenn Johnson sent me to catch up with her."

The man stepped out onto the porch and I realized that he was the one I'd seen earlier through the window at Glenn's house in Nashville. He looked so much like Mac that I had to wonder how I'd missed the resemblance.

"I've seen your face before, lass," he said softly. "Do you know my son, Cormac? Have you come with news about him?"

That was the last thing I'd expected and I didn't know what to tell him. Mac had said something about looking in on his parents, but not necessarily about visiting them. The way he'd talked to Siofra he was worried about their reaction to his being a vampire.

Before I could think of something to say, a woman's voice called out from inside. "Alaster, who is it?"

"It's the girl from the photograph," he replied without turning. "The one we found in Cormac's things. She's here for Corrine, she says Glenn sent her."

The woman I'd seen pouring tea for Corrine came out to stand next to the man. She peered into the darkness at me then looked up at her husband. "She does look like the photo," she said hesitantly, "but this girl doesn't look old enough to have known Cormac twenty years ago."

Okay, they could stop talking like I wasn't there any time now, it was starting to get annoying.

The man looked at me in surprise. "Are you a mage?" he asked, walking to the edge of the porch. The dog walked closer to me and started sniffing at my feet and legs.

I ignored it and shook my head. "No." I wished it were that simple.

Mac's father looked at me with narrowed eyes for a moment, frowning. "Do you have strong ties with the Kindred?" he demanded, his voice stern. The dog walked around behind me and I had to work to concentrate on what Mac's father had just said.

"Not in the way you mean, sir," I said softly. He was thinking I was a ghoul. "It's complicated."

"Did you know our son?" the woman asked as she came to stand next to him.

"I did," I admitted with a sad smile. Lying to Mac's parents was not an option since they were both mages and could probably read my mind anyway. "I'm Eliza Gentry."

"Eliza Gentry," I heard a woman say from behind me.

I spun to see a tall dark haired woman standing a little too close for comfort.

"You must be Cara," I replied as I took a step to the side and turned so that I could see all three of them. I really didn't want a shapeshifter that close to me or a mage at my back unless I knew for sure that they didn't have it out for me. God only knew what Siofra had said to them.

"Bobby told me about you," she murmured. "He said that you were the first mortal he ever met that didn't run screaming from Garou. Are you kinfolk?"

"No." I wasn't going to offer any more to her, I didn't really like her attitude. She reminded me too much of Siofra.

"I'm sorry," the woman on the porch said suddenly, "where are our manners? I'm Noinen Brennan and this is my husband, Alaster. Apparently you've heard of our daughter-in-law, Cara."

"I thought I'd come by and see if she showed up," Cara told them. "I didn't want you to be surprised." Her face told me she didn't trust me, which was just fine because I didn't trust her much either.

"It's good to finally meet you," I told the Brennan's honestly.

"You're the one Corrine told us about," Alaster murmured. "Her birth mother. Bobby told us you might be coming."

It wasn't hard to see where this was going. "I am." I took a deep breath and waited for the question I knew was coming.

"Just how well did you know my son?" he asked guardedly.

"We were—" I glanced between the three of them, not sure what to say. Would they believe me? This was one of the reasons I hadn't come here when Mac had died. "We were close," I said finally.

"Funny," Cara said slowly, "Bobby said that you used to date Glenn."

Just fucking ducky. Remind me to tell Bobby to mind his own damn business. "That was before Mac came to Baltimore," I told her coolly trying to keep my face blank. "Mac and I were together almost a year before his—" I stopped myself from saying he'd been embraced. "Before his disappearance."

"Is he... alive?" Noinen asked, fear and hope written on her face. "Do you know where he is?"

Why in the hell had I let Mac talk me in to coming here without him or Glenn to answer all these questions? What was I supposed to say to her, he's dead, but he'll be along in a few days?

"I thought he died in the attack," I said carefully shooting for as much of the truth as I could give her under the circumstances, "but yes, I do."

"And you're not going to tell us," Cara stated, glaring at me.

"No, I'm not," I told her simply. "He needs a little more time before he comes here. He's had amnesia, he didn't remember anything about his old life until a few weeks ago."

"La mort marchera chez lui et il ne saura ni la famille ni l'ami ni lui-même," Alaster murmured.

I didn't understand what Alaster had said, but apparently Noinen did. She looked at her husband thoughtfully, then turned back at me. "When Mac came home that last time he told me that he would be bringing a surprise with him," she said softly. "Would that surprise have been you?"

"We were supposed to come here for Stephen's birthday," I admitted. "He wanted me to meet you."

"But you never made it because of the raids," she said slowly.

"Yeah." I sighed sadly. It was starting to get cold and it didn't look like they were going to invite me in any time soon. I looked away and noticed the beautiful flowers planted along the front of the porch.

"If you were so close to Cormac," Cara asked guardedly, "why didn't you try to contact us when he disappeared?"

"I didn't know how," I said honestly. "And anyway, I-I wasn't sure you'd believe me. Mac told me that I was going to be a surprise to everyone, so I assumed he'd never mentioned me. It would have look suspicious if I'd shown up out of the blue and claimed to be his p—" I stopped myself, not wanting to reveal too much. "His fiancée."

"His pregnant fiancée, isn't that what you were about to say?" Alaster stated. There was something like relief on his face, or maybe it was more like satisfaction. "The girl is his, isn't she? She's about the right age. *D'une union avec fureur joyeuse un premier sera formé. She is au premier.*"

I didn't understand his words or his reaction. "What?" I asked, trying for a respectful tone. "I'm sorry, I don't speak French."

Noinen smiled. "There is no need for you to apologize," she replied. "It is obvious that Corrine has grown up well. She is a beautiful child and when she has fully awakened, she will be of her father's ra—tradition."

"She does take after Mac," I admitted.

"I mean no offense, but exactly what kind of tie do you have with the Kindred?" Alaster asked. "Your aura is very light for a human's. You look like someone who has been ghoulé a long time."

"And you smell like a vampire," Cara added as if the word tasted bad.

I almost smiled but the fact that even here Kate haunted me made me want to scream. What was I supposed to say, I'm half vamp, invite me into your home? I had to bite my tongue to stop from laughing and rubbed a hand across my eyes. It had been a long day and the night looked like it was going to be even longer.

"I'm not a ghoul," I told him firmly ignoring Cara's comment. "The aura is something I... got from my mother. She is Kindred."

"If you are not a ghoul, why do you look the same as you did twenty years ago?" Cara demanded. "And why do you smell like a vamp?"

Alaster shot her a glance that made her back down. He smiled apologetically to me and said, "May I ask what your people are?"

My people? "I don't have any 'people,' I just don't age like mortals," I replied slowly. "That's something else I got from my mother. But I'm not a ghoul, I swear it on Corrine's life."

He studied my face for a long moment. "Why don't you come inside," he suggested finally. "We'll find you something to eat, you look hungry."

I nodded, glad he wasn't going to debate the issue with me. "I would appreciate that," I said thankfully. I hadn't eaten since breakfast that morning with Corrine.

I walked up the stairs and they led the way inside to the kitchen. Cara stayed right behind me the whole way, making the hair on the back of my neck rise. I would have preferred her to walk in front of me, but I knew it would have been wicked rude to insist on it. I didn't want them to think I didn't trust them, even though I really didn't.

"Eliza is a pretty name," Noinen commented as she warmed me up a bowl of very good smelling stew. "What does it mean?"

"It's short for Elizabeth," I told her as she sat a plate in front of me. "I'm not sure what it means." The food tasted even better than it smelled, it had been a long time since I'd eaten a home cooked meal like this.

"I believe the alternative spelling of Aliza means 'joy'," Alaster told her as they watched me eat.

"The translation may have been off," she replied.

"In either case," he agreed. They waited patiently for me to finish before they started in with their questions again.

Noinen had just taken my bowl away when Alaster cleared his throat. "When did you find out Mac was alive?"

I sat down the glass that I'd been drinking milk from and looked at him. Now the questions would begin and I needed my wits about me not to give too much away. "Almost two weeks ago. He came up to me in a bar and told me that he'd dreamed about me."

"And when you found out Corrine was in danger you took him there and he saved her." When I nodded, he smiled.

Cara had been silently watching me, but now she spoke up. "How long have Glenn and Siofra known about Mac?"

I looked away, not sure what to say. Glenn acted like he'd known what Mac was for a long time, but I wasn't so sure Siofra had. The fact that she'd invaded my dreams told me she'd known where I was for years, but I didn't think she'd told Glenn. You know, married couples really should communicate better than that.

"I think you'd have to ask them," I said finally.

"I'm asking you," she said sternly.

I met her gaze without flinching. "I don't know how long they've known," I told her coolly. "You would have to ask them."

She seemed surprised that I wasn't afraid of her. "Bobby said that Garou don't scare you," she murmured. "Why?"

"Garou aren't monsters," I reminded her. "They bleed just like everyone else does."

"You sound like you have experience in that area," she told me.

I could have told her that I hunted supernatural creatures for a living, but it probably wasn't a good idea while I was sitting in a room full of them. Hell, a house full of them. "I've fought with and against them on occasion."

Alaster cleared his throat again. "You said that Mac had amnesia? How much does he remember?"

"Not very much," I told him. "Some things from Baltimore, his motorcycle, Siofra. He's remembering more every night."

"If he hadn't remembered anything in all these years," Noinen asked slowly, "why did he start remembering now?"

I moved a little uncomfortably in my seat. The only way to fully explain would be to tell them about Dougal's blood, and Mac's vampirism wasn't a topic I wanted to discuss with them. "Actually, I think it was me," I said reluctantly. "The more time he spends with me, the more of his memory he gets back."

"Ah," Noinen breathed softly.

"Why does he need more time before coming to see us?" Alaster asked, ignoring her. "Is there something wrong?"

"I don't think he's ready to see you just yet," I replied hesitantly. "He's been through a lot of changes in his life, and I think he's afraid of how you'll react to him. He just needs a little more time, he hasn't exactly been well received by anyone from his old life, even me."

"Weren't you happy to see him?" Noinen asked.

"Not exactly," I admitted with a wry smile, "but I got over it."

"I have to wonder why Glenn didn't mention you when he came to tell us Mac disappeared," Cara said abruptly.

I had to wonder that myself. "I don't know when he came here, but I didn't actually call him until almost two weeks after the raid," I told her. "He thought I was dead, maybe he didn't want to make the family feel worse about what happened."

"Why did you wait so long to call him?" Noinen asked gently.

I looked down at my hands, remembering how sick I'd been. If Kate hadn't found me, if she hadn't told me I was pregnant, I would have waited on that mountain for Mac until the hunger and the exposure had killed me. "Between one thing and another I was mostly out of it for that long. I called him as soon as I could."

"You were well enough to leave Baltimore but not well enough to call anyone?" Cara sounded like she didn't believe me.

I was getting tired of the twenty questions so I leaned forward and looked her straight in the eye. "I was taken from Baltimore. After that my first thought was to find Mac," I said irritably. "If you doubt me, why don't one of you play by Glenn's rules and read my mind?" I looked over at Alaster because of the three of them I felt he was the most likely to have that ability.

He studied my face for a long moment before nodding slowly. I felt a tingle run across my skin and sat back with my eyes closed. I couldn't help feeling once again Valerie's teeth in my

throat, and seeing Dougal's in Mac's. I remembered waking in the Baltimore chantry, and Kate getting me out of there.

I let my mind wander over the trip to the mountain, and the time I'd spent waiting for Mac until Kate found me. I let all of the emotions I'd felt then run through me, giving Alaster a taste of what it had been like for me. When I'd shared all I was willing to, I opened my eyes.

"That's enough," I told him firmly. The tingling subsided and I felt him leave my mind.

He sat there for a long time in stunned silence, looking off into the distance. After a while, he looked first at his wife then at his daughter-in-law. When I saw tears fill Cara's eyes I knew he was sharing what he'd seen with them. I felt a stab of sympathy for the woman, she'd lost her husband not that long ago.

I reached out and put my hand on hers. "I'm sorry about Angus, Cara," I said softly. "Mac always spoke fondly of him, I'm sure he was a good man."

She nodded but pulled her hand away. "I'm going for a walk," she said in a low voice as she rose and left the kitchen.

I sat back and drained the glass of milk, trying to regain my composure. I knew exactly what she was going through, but I hated thinking about that time in my life, hated remembering how badly I'd wanted to die.

"You obviously love my son very much," Alaster said softly.

"I do," I whispered. I hoped they understood that when they found out what Mac was. "Is she going to be all right?"

"She just needs time," Noinen told me. "It's late. Let me show you to Mac's old room, you can sleep there."

"Thank you," I replied rising to my feet. "I'd like to look in on Corrine if I could." I just wanted to make sure she was all right.

She nodded and led the way while Alaster followed behind. We went up the stairs and down a hallway to stand in front of a closed door. "She's in there," Noinen whispered.

I turned the knob and slowly opened the door enough to see inside. Corrine was curled up on her side sleeping like a baby. I felt much better just seeing her, knowing that she really was safe. I closed the door and thanked Noinen as she led me back downstairs to a room just off the living room.

"We haven't really changed anything," she said as she opened the door. "I always hoped that some day he would come home."

It was strange walking into Mac's room without him there with me. He'd talked about coming here when we lived in Baltimore, told me about the house and his family, but nothing prepared me for actually being there.

Noinen hadn't lied, it looked as if Mac had walked out of the room yesterday with every intention of coming back. Everything was clean, but there was an organized clutter in the room that reminded me of him very much.

A stack of books sat on the bedside table next to a candle as if waiting for him to come back for them. Along the left wall was a tall bookcase filled to overflowing with books on what looked like every subject you could think of, certainly more than I'd ever thought about. There was a desk under a window to my right with a clock and a calendar sitting on top of it. The calendar was turned to January 1979.

"Are you all right?" Noinen asked.

I'd forgotten she was there. "Yeah," I told her. "It just feels a little strange."

She nodded. "I probably should have cleaned it out years ago, but I could bring myself to do it. I never gave up hope that he'd come home."

I hoped that he would, but since I couldn't guarantee it, I didn't say anything.

"There's a bathroom just down the hall," she said, turning to point toward a door a few feet away. "I'll make sure there are fresh towels in there for you. If you need anything else, just let me know."

"Thank you," I replied. "I'm sure I have everything I need."

"Good night, then," she said as she walked out, closing me in with the ghost of Mac's childhood.

I stood in the center of the room and looked around for a few minutes. I wanted to go through everything in the room but somehow that just felt like I'd be invading his life. Not that he remembered any of it anyway, but I still couldn't bring myself to do it.

Eventually I walked once around the room, running my hand along things he'd touched so many years ago. My heart ached from missing him and once again I wondered how I'd be able to live without seeing him every night.

After I took off my pants I pulled back the covers and laid down on the bed. For a heartbeat I thought I could still smell him on the sheets, but I knew that had to be my imagination. It had been almost twenty years after all, whatever scent he'd once left behind would be long gone.

It took me a long time to fall asleep and when I did, I dreamed.

I fired the crossbow before Mac could bring his guns up all the way. The quarrel sped across the room and into the chest of the man who had been trying to climb through the window. It went through his body and impaled him against the window frame.

As Mac lowered his guns, I walked around him toward the body. A crossbow fell from his hand and I realized that it was Gerome. I cursed.

"Why don't we go to Jester's tonight, Eliza," I heard Gerome say. I turned around and we were standing in the library of the Cenaculum.

"I don't mix business with pleasure," I told him.

"You think I'm business, or pleasure?" he asked, grinning.

"I think you don't take no for an answer," I replied. I was tired and in no shape to be fending him off for the rest of the night. I'd dreamed about Mac again, and that always threw me for a few days.

Gerome reached out and touched my hair. "Why are you so against dating?" he asked gently. "Is it just me? Am I an asshole?"

I stepped out of his reach and tried to smile. "I don't date, Gerome."

Suddenly I heard a noise behind me and I turned, firing the crossbow before Mac could bring his guns up all the way. The quarrel sped across the room and into the chest of the man who had been trying to climb through the window. It went through his body and impaled him against the window frame.

As Mac lowered his guns, I walked around him toward the body. A crossbow fell from his hand and I realized that it was Gerome. I cursed.

Gerome looked up at me with blood trickling from the corner of his mouth. "You won't date me, but you'll kill me, won't you?" he demanded. "If I was a vampire, would you change your mind?"

I sat bolt upright in Mac's bed. It took me a minute to realize where I was, and when I did I sat back against the headboard with my knees to my chest. At the time I'd been more concerned about keeping Mac safe than about killing a friend, but now what I'd done hit home.

Gerome had just been doing his job hunting vamps and I'd killed him for it. If he hadn't been aiming at Mac, would I have acted the same way? If it had been any other vamp, would I have let Gerome fire at it? Would I have helped him decapitate it?

Damn, I didn't need this sudden attack of conscience. I'd done what I had to do to protect the man I loved, just like I'd done everything I needed to do in order to protect Corrine. I had nothing to be sorry about. Nothing.

It took me a long time to get back to sleep.

HONEST ANSWERS

OH BUT I NEED SOME TIME OFF FROM THAT EMOTION
TIME TO PICK MY HEART UP OFF THE FLOOR
FAITH — GEORGE MICHAELS

I woke up a few hours later to the sound of the bedroom door opening. By instinct alone I kept my mind blank and my eyes mostly closed. Peeking at the door I saw that Glenn was looking across the room at me. I didn't move and a moment later he closed the door. Quickly and quietly I slid out of the bed and slipped my pants on before I silently eased the door open.

"She's still sleeping," I heard Glenn say. Oh, he was so wrong.

"You should have told us about her," Alaster said sternly. "You were supposed to watch out for her." He seemed more than a little upset with his son-in-law.

"I tried to," Glenn protested. "She wouldn't tell me where she was and I had no way to know."

"But the child, you had to have known about her," Mac's dad insisted.

"I didn't," Glenn replied. "Sir, the last time I saw Eliza she was not with child. Don't you think I would have told you if she were?"

And how the fuck would he have known if I were pregnant or not? Had he been pulling magic shit on me every time he saw me to check? That pissed me off. Very carefully I opened the door even further and stepped out into the hallway. The living room was right around the corner.

"I would like to believe you son, but the fact is that you didn't tell us about her at all," Alaster reminded him.

"I was wrong, I know that," Glenn admitted. "But if you think about it, mom didn't say that the raven or her son would look after the maiden, she said that joy would watch her grow."

"Are you trying to avoid of the consequences of your actions?" Cara demanded. I wondered who else was in the room.

"I am not," Glenn replied coolly. "I am just suggesting that things happened this way for a reason. How else would Corrine have the monetary backing she has now if Eliza hadn't been forced to work with the vamps?"

Now I was really pissed. Glenn had no right to tell these people about my life. It was my choice who I told, and I didn't like him sharing when I'd had no intention of doing so.

"Perhaps you have a point, Glenn," Mac's father replied.

"Just how long have you known about Mac?" Cara asked. I almost felt sorry for Glenn, she didn't seem any friendlier to him than she'd been with me last night.

He paused for a moment before he answered. "I knew he was embraced. When Eliza told me that he was dead, I thought she'd destroyed him." That was news to me. "I didn't find out until later that he was still around and I thought it would hurt you too much to know that what he was when there was no child."

Cara started to say something but Alaster spoke over her words. "It is not for us to judge the truth of your mother's words."

"I wish she was still alive to bring us guidance," Glenn said sadly.

"As do I," Alaster agreed. "The only thing we can do now is guide Corrine through her Awakening. I'm not sure how we can convince Eliza that her time of watching over her is done."

Glenn chuckled. "I don't think we can. She's so used to watching over the girl that I don't think she'll ever learn how to let go."

"Or want to," I added harshly as I walked around the corner into the living room. "If I don't watch over her, people like you will take advantage of her, hurt her."

They all turned to look at me at the same time, and it was clear from the looks on their faces that they didn't like the fact that I'd overheard them.

"How long have you been there, Eliza?" Glenn asked.

"Long enough," I told him.

"Hear anything you liked?" Cara asked.

"Cara," Alaster said gently.

She sat back and watched me broodingly.

"Please," he added, gesturing toward the couch beside him. "Come and sit down."

I glanced at each of them, not sure if I wanted to sit down. I'd left my knife in the bedroom, not that it would do me much good against them if they wanted to do me harm. After a minute, I walked across the room and sat.

"Did you sleep well?" Alaster asked.

"Yeah," I lied. They didn't need to know about my nightmares.

"Do you mind if we ask you a few questions about Cormac?"

"Did you know he was embraced?" Cara demanded before I could reply.

Her attitude was annoying, worse than mine usually is. "I believe I told you last night, Cara," I said irritably. "I thought he was dead until two weeks ago."

She looked at Alaster. "Glenn should have told us. We would have done something."

"Like what?" Glenn asked her. "What could you have done?"

"Avenged him," she replied fiercely.

"I've already done that." We all turned to see Siofra standing at the door to the kitchen. Guess I wasn't the only one who listened around corners.

"What?" Cara demanded before I could.

Siofra didn't answer, she just walked over to the other couch and sat down next to Glenn.

He took her hand. "The vamp who led the raid on his apartment is dead," Glenn told Cara. "Siofra put out a contract on him and he was destroyed five years ago."

"That was you?" I said, choking back a laugh. "You'd better hope Mac doesn't find out, that vamp was like a father to him."

"He knows," she said softly.

My eyebrows shot up; she hadn't mentioned anything about any contract in Nashville. "What, you invade everyone's dreams?" I demanded.

"He is my brother," she reminded me, ignoring the surprised look Alaster was giving her. "I did nothing to harm him."

"Unlike the instant replay you've been putting me through for the last twenty years, right?" I bit out harshly. "But that's okay if you make me relive my worst nightmare, isn't it? After all, I'm not family am I? I'm just the one who got Mac killed."

Absolute silence filled the room after my outburst. Alaster was staring at Siofra with disapproval while Cara looked like she was trying to stop herself from shifting to big-furry

form. Siofra's expression told me she'd be really glad if Cara did just that, while Glenn just sat back and looked at me sadly.

I didn't care if they liked what I'd said or if Cara decided to take a piece out of me for my words. If Siofra didn't like hearing the truth, she was shit out of luck. And anyway, it was true; I had gotten Mac killed. If I'd had the strength to either leave him or destroy Kate when she showed up, none of this would have happened.

"You admit that this was your fault?" Cara asked in a very controlled voice.

"I know it was," I replied calmly. "I knew Kate was trouble. I should have killed her or left town the minute she showed up."

"You've blamed yourself for this all these years," Alaster murmured. "Don't you think it's time to let it go? Move on with your life?"

Was it? Kate was in the hands of her clan, Corrine was safe with her father's family, and Mac was alive, more or less. "Maybe. It doesn't really matter, does it? He's Kindred. Nothing can change that now."

"You're right," Cara agreed too quickly. "He's a vampire. We should—"

I interrupted her before she said something I'd have to hurt her for. "Don't say it, Cara," I warned her, my voice hard and cold as ice. "Don't even think about it."

"Eliza is a little protective about people she cares about," Glenn said into the stunned silence. "We've already had this discussion. She won't hear of it."

Cara shook her head. "Bobby said you used to kill vamps with the best of them," she drawled. "Too bad you've lost your edge."

"That's enough," Alaster said before I could reply, his voice firm. "Mac loved this woman enough to ask her to marry him twenty years ago, and she gave birth to my grandchild. That's enough to make her a daughter in my eyes, family. We don't treat family like this," he added sternly, looking at each one of them in turn.

I was surprised that he considered me family. Hell, the only family I'd ever had in my life was Corrine and Mac, but I sure didn't feel like a part of his family. I couldn't possibly be with the way Cara and Siofra so obviously felt about me, not to mention the way I felt about them.

Alaster reached out and touched my leg gently. "Eliza, I don't want to open any old wounds," he said kindly, "but perhaps it would help things if you told us a little about Baltimore."

I looked up in surprise. "Hasn't Glenn told you? I would think that since he's your son-in-law you'd trust him before believing what I had to say," I murmured looking at Glenn pointedly. He looked back with no expression on his face.

"He never told us about you," Alaster admitted. "And you would have been my daughter-in-law if things had turned out differently."

"Don't you think it would have hurt you and your family more to know what had really happened?" I asked, ignoring the daughter-in-law comment.

"Still, we could have helped you, Eliza." He seemed to think they really could have, but for real now, what could they have done?

"That may be true, but we'll never know now, will we?" I asked softly. "You can't change the past, Mr. Brennan. Some things you just have to live with."

"You've lived with it all these years," he said softly. "Don't you think telling a little about it now would help?"

What, did he want to get all warm and cozy about it? I sighed and looked down at my lap, knowing that I couldn't refuse him. He was Mac's father after all and perhaps I did owe him something for keeping Corrine from him all these years.

"Mac and I met right after he came to town," I said quietly, ignoring everyone else and talking only to Alaster. "He moved into the brownstone with Glenn and the others, and I had an apartment not too far away. We dated for a while, and Mac asked me to marry him. We'd been living together a week when the vamps attacked. If they'd waited one more night to attack, we would have been gone." What else was I supposed to say? I really didn't want to relate every detail of our relationship to any of them.

"Do you think they knew that?" he asked softly.

Kate always seemed to know whatever she wanted to. "They knew. Kate Hepburn wanted Mac and I separated. She wanted him dead so she could control me again."

"Was she your master?" His voice was gentle so I tried not to take offense.

"She thought she was," I replied coldly. "She's my mother, not my master. She 'saved' me and took me far away from where she knew Mac was. I thought she was helping me." I couldn't have been more wrong.

I sighed and forced thoughts of Kate from my mind. "I loved Mac, he was the best thing that ever happened to me. If I had known what Kate was planning, I would have destroyed her the minute I found out she was in town."

"Where is this Kate now?" he asked.

"The Tremere have her," I told him with a grim smile. "They want to 'study' her. I wanted her dead but hey, this is better. I hope they study her a long time."

"You don't like her much, do you?"

"No. Look, anything else you want to know about Baltimore you're going to have to get from Mac," I told him. The warm fuzzy session was over.

"But you said he doesn't remember," Alaster reminded me.

"He remembers more every night," I told him. "Eventually he'll remember everything. There was a reason he didn't tell you about me and I don't know what that reason was. I don't want him mad at me for telling you things he wouldn't tell you himself."

"All right," he agreed. "Perhaps after you speak with my son we'll talk again. Do you expect to hear from him soon?"

"I figure he'll get a hold of me tonight," I said, though I wasn't quite sure how he was going to do that. Maybe I'd try to call him after sundown.

"Will you tell him to come home?" he asked softly. "It doesn't matter what happened to him, or how much he's changed, he's still our son."

"I'll tell him. He might not agree, but I'll try." I looked around the room for a moment, then back at Alaster. "Do you know where Corrine is this morning?" I asked, standing up.

"She's helping Noinen with breakfast. It's probably ready by now." He stood up and looked at me for a minute. "Does she know what Mac is?"

"She knows he's Kindred," I told him. "She just doesn't know what that is. I thought Mac would be the best person to explain that."

He nodded and gestured toward the hall. Everyone else got up too and we all went into the kitchen. Breakfast was ready, but Corrine wasn't, not to see me, anyway. She wouldn't even look at me when I came in, and didn't answer my 'good morning'.

After we all sat down, I looked at Glenn. "How did you leave Mac?" Actually I was surprised I hadn't thought about that earlier.

"The same way I found him," he told me calmly. "I kept an eye on the building for a little while, he spent some time with a female vamp. I assume they are close?"

I glanced at Mac's parents. "As close as family," I said carefully. "He considers her his sister."

"You sure?" he asked persistently. "She seemed to have him wrapped around her little finger."

"Now you sound like Kate," I shot back in a hard voice. "Be careful I don't do to you what I did to her."

He grinned and touched his chest. "I don't think the quarrel would look good with my jacket."

"That's enough, you two," Siofra said sharply. "Remember where you are."

I looked at the Brennans; I'd almost forgotten they were there. "I'm sorry," I murmured.

"I apologize," Glenn added. "Eliza and I have a few things to work out."

"There's nothing to work out," I told him with a level look. "Everything's cool. You stay out of my mind and we're five by five."

Alaster shot him a harsh look that made me think mind invasion wasn't considered good manners with most mages. I'd certainly never met one that had talked to me like that before, let alone without permission. Glenn actually had the grace to look ashamed of himself.

Conversation for the rest of the meal was fairly civil. I held my tongue and listened to the interaction of the family. They all got along well, but there was a tenseness toward Siofra and Glenn that seemed new. Well, not that I'd seen the family together before.

When the meal was over, Corrine excused herself and I quietly followed her into the living room. She stood at the windows staring out and acted like I wasn't there.

I looked at her back for a long time without saying anything. Finally I sighed. "I take it you're not happy to see me."

"Oh, now what would make you say that?" she asked sarcastically.

"Gee, maybe the hostility I'm sensing?" She never had been any good at hiding her feelings.

"Well at least spending time with Cormac has broadened your vocabulary," she said bitingly before she finally turned to look at me. "You just couldn't give me the time that I asked for, could you?" she asked harshly.

I didn't flinch. "I'm sorry if I thought your safety was more important than your personal space." I didn't like her being pissed at me, but at least I knew she was safe.

She rolled her eyes. "Jesus, how much safer can I get?" she demanded. "I'm out in the middle of fucking nowhere, and Bobby and Jared are both here. How many bodyguards do I need?" She turned away and stared out the window at the fields.

"Just one," I said softly. "One I trust." When she didn't answer, I added, "That'd be me."

"Jesus, my mom was never this clingy when it came to me leaving home," she murmured angrily.

"Yeah, well she doesn't know everything I do about the world," I told her.

She gave me a hard look. "At least she trusted me enough to let me make my own mistakes."

Fine, if that's the way she wanted it. "Okay, next time I'll let you get killed."

"Oh, you're so noble," she drawled. After one last biting look, she turned and walked toward the hall.

"Corrine wait," I called after her. She stopped in the doorway, but didn't turn around.

"Look, I know you need space and I'm not here to crowd you," I said apologetically. "Pretend I'm not here if you have to. I just needed to make sure you're all right. I'll probably be leaving when Mac gets here anyway." We only had a week left before I had to go back to my life and forget about loving him, again.

She looked up at the ceiling. "And you do like to call the shots, don't you mommy dearest?" she bit out harshly.

God, had I really been that controlling? Was I that much like Kate? I turned and looked out the window with a hand over my mouth to hold in the sobs that threatened to break loose. I heard her leave the room and buried my face in my hands.

I kept trying to tell myself that at least Corrine was safe and that was all that mattered. It didn't help. I went into Mac's bedroom and sat down on the bed, but I got restless real fast. I knew Corrine needed time to work things out, but I was worried about her. I wanted to go after her, but I knew that would piss her off so I decided not to. I just had to trust that the farm and Galway would be safe for her.

After a while the walls started closing in on me. I walked through the house and onto the front porch to stare off into the fields hoping that the fresh air would clear my mind. I could see the village in the distance, and smell the ocean.

The air was a little chilly and I rubbed my arms to warm them. I missed Mac; I didn't know what I'd do when we got back to Salem and I wouldn't be able to see him for a lot longer than the few hours it had been since I left him in Boston.

Someone cleared their throat behind me and I turned to see that Corrine was sitting on the bench under the bay window. I stiffened, waiting for her to say more hurtful things to me, things I knew I deserved to hear. She surprised me.

"Eliza, I'm sorry," she said softly.

I turned back to look at the fields. "No, you were right," I admitted. "I have to no—I have no right to be clingy." For real now, I'd given up any right I had to be her mother when the Wrights had adopted her.

"No, I understand," she told me. "It's just that there's an awful lot that I need to think about and I just wanted to be removed from everything for a while. And when you showed up...."

I'd screwed up her private time. I smiled wryly. "You picked the wrong place to get away from family."

She laughed dryly. "I didn't pick this place."

"Let me guess," I drawled, my voice hard. "Siofra." I couldn't help the contempt that came out in my voice, I was still pissed at Mac's sister for the dream invasions.

"Why don't you like Siofra?" Corrine asked softly.

I need to learn how to hide my feelings better, sometimes I swear I'm as easy to read as my daughter is. "I really don't know her well enough to like or not like her," I said carefully.

She seemed to accept that. "So what did you mean by the wrong place to get away from family?"

I shook my head. "I would have thought that was wicked obvious."

"Are you saying these people are related to Mac?" There was a note of wonder in her voice that threw me.

I turned to look at her in surprise. "You mean you didn't figure it out already?"

She smiled and leaned against the back of the bench. "Talk about your ready-made family," she murmured. "One day I have only parents, and now I have this entire extended family. Next you'll be telling me I'm related to people in Salem that I don't know about."

"Actually," I chuckled, tucking my hair behind my ear, "Mac has a sister of sorts there."

"Really?"

"You don't know her." Christina's a vamp; Corrine had better not know her, not if Ford was upholding his end of the contract.

"Wow," she breathed. "Why didn't you come to Galway when you thought Mac was dead?" she asked after a few minutes. She was looking at me strangely, almost suspiciously.

I didn't like seeing that expression on her face. "I didn't have a way to get here, Corrine," I said softly.

"Why didn't you call them? I'm sure they would have gotten us here, one way or another."

How many times did I have to answer this question? "I lost almost everything when the apartment was raided," I told her. "There was only a few things Kate brought with us, and their phone number wasn't one of them."

"What about Glenn?" she asked. "Siofra told me you called him. Why didn't you ask him to bring you here?"

I looked away. "Glenn and I had dated for a while before Mac came to Baltimore," I admitted. "It didn't seem like a very good idea to go running to him."

"You gave me away because you didn't want to ask your ex-boyfriend for a favor?" she said, her voice cold.

"There was a lot more to it than that," I said firmly. "I told you that Mac hadn't told his family about me. I didn't think they'd believe me if I showed up on their doorstep from out of the blue like that." I turned around, searching for some clue as to why she was so angry with me. "And I didn't 'give you away' Corrine, I took care of you. Is that what this is really about? Your adoption?"

"I just thought you would have tried harder to come here," she said evenly. "Then you wouldn't have had to give me up like you did. You wouldn't have had to be a double agent, and we could have had a normal life."

"I don't understand, Corrine," I whispered. "Don't you think you had a good life?" I'd certainly done everything I could to make sure she had.

"Given the choice, I would have rather had my real family," she told me sadly. "I think I understand that you did what you thought best but I can't help thinking about what might have been."

"I've thought about that every day," I told her honestly. "It's not good to live that way, we have to deal with the way life is, not the way we want it to be."

"I know," she replied, leaning forward again and looking down at her hands in her lap. "That's why you never let me know you were my birth mother, wasn't it? Because you didn't want me to dream about what could have been?"

"I've done enough dreaming for the both of us," I said softly. "It wouldn't have done you any good to think that way." I went over to the bench and sat down next to her, close but not touching.

"Can you ever forgive me for being such a bitch?" she asked, her eyes pleading. "I'm really sorry. I'm glad you're here, I just wanted some time to adjust to everything." She slid closer and leaned against my shoulder.

I put my arm around her. "There's nothing to forgive," I told her. "I wanted to give you time but there's some issues between Glenn and me and Mac, and I'm not sure how far I can trust him, or Siofra."

"But they're family," she reminded me. "What harm could they possibly cause to any of us?"

Had she forgotten Kate so quickly? "Maybe you need to remember who I staked last night," I reminded her. "My mother?"

"But from what you've led me to believe, your mother was a real witch." She looked up at me questioningly. "These people are so welcoming. They made me feel so at home."

"Step into my parlor," I murmured. I didn't want to be surprised by a knife to the throat because of the blood in my veins.

"I can't help feeling that they won't do anything to hurt any of us," she said softly. "Where is Mac by the way? Is he coming here?"

"He's coming to Ireland," I told her, glad of the change of subject, "but I'm not sure he's coming here. I think he's afraid of how his parents will react when they see him."

"And how do you think we'll react?" Noinen asked from the doorway.

I looked at her as Corrine sat up. "That remains to be seen, doesn't it?"

"Do you really think so badly of us that you believe we'll reject or condemn our son?" She seemed upset at the very thought. "Do you think we'd hurt any of you?"

"Not really," I replied honestly. If I honestly thought they'd hurt us, I would have gotten Corrine and left with her the night before. This was about what Mac thought.

"Then why did you sleep with a knife last night?" she asked almost casually.

"I usually do," I told her in the same tone, wondering how she knew that. "It helps me sleep."

Her eyes told me that she had a lot of questions for me, questions she didn't want to ask because Corrine was right there. I looked back at her knowing that I wouldn't be answering any of them if I could help it. I'd lived the last twenty years, hell the last fifty without her pity; I sure as hell didn't need it now. She backed off, but I could tell she didn't like it one bit.

I spent most of the day with Noinen and Corrine, making quite sure that I wasn't alone with any one person long enough for them to give me the third degree. After lunch we took a trip into town and I was a little surprised at the size of the fishing village. There were some very interesting shops there, and walking through them I remembered the gift I'd bought Corrine. When we got back to the Brennan's farm, I went into Mac's room and took it from the suitcase, then snuck upstairs and left it on the bed in the room she was using.

Dinner was strained, mostly because of the unanswered questions hanging in the air. Also I think everyone was a little upset with Siofra and Glenn for not telling them everything. I half expected Noinen or Glenn to try and get me alone afterwards, but neither of them did.

We all went into the living room for coffee and I listened to them tell Corrine about life in Galway. It was all very interesting, but as the sun started to go down I got restless. I kept trying to think of a way to call him. It took me a while, but I finally did.

"Excuse me," I said softly as I got to my feet.

Corrine looked up. "Do you need something?"

"No," I told her in a low voice. "I'm just going to visit the ladies room."

She nodded and I walked out of the room but instead of going left toward the downstairs bathroom, I went up the stairs. When I'd put the gift in her room earlier, I'd seen her cell phone lying half out of her purse. I slipped into her room and got it quickly then dialed Mac's number

After a few rings, he answered. "Hello?"

"Mac." It was so good to hear his voice.

"Hello, luv," he drawled.

"Hello." I missed him but even so I couldn't help but smile. "What are you doing?"

"Getting ready to come to Galway."

About damn time. "Good."

"What's going on?" He sounded concerned.

"Just remind me never to let you send me on ahead like this," I told him.

"Not enjoying yourself?"

"As long as I avoided the ninety questions, yeah." It wasn't so bad, but it would have been much better if he were here with me.

"Only ninety?" He almost sounded disappointed.

"From each person," I clarified.

"Only ninety?" he repeated.

I shook my head at his obvious amusement. "Well, then I spent the rest of the day avoiding being alone with any of them."

He was silent for a moment, then, "How is the family?"

"Very interesting," I admitted. "And interested."

"It's been a while since they've had news, I'm sure," he reminded me.

"Oh, yeah," I agreed. "They're a little mad at Glenn."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, cause he didn't tell them that he saw you until after I showed up."

He chuckled for a moment then fell silent.

"They're looking forward to seeing you," I told him. "So is Corrine."

"I can imagine," he murmured. "I'm not sure how the family would take my, ah, current state."

"They know about that," I said softly.

"What?" The tone of his voice made me glad that I wasn't the one that had told them.

"It wasn't me."

"Who?" he demanded. He was back in Cormac mode full force.

"That would be Glenn—"

"When?"

"—or Siofra, I'm not really sure," I continued. "And that would be last night, or maybe this morning." I didn't know when Glenn had shown up.

"Why?"

I smiled grimly. "Might have something to do with the new asshole he got ripped, I'm not really clear on that."

"Just fucking ducky," he growled.

That made me laugh. "You know, I've been feeling that exact same way quite often here." When he didn't say anything more, I sighed. "So anyway they're looking forward to seeing you."

"Mmm, we'll have to wait and see."

"Yeah?" Why would we have to wait? Why did he seem so reluctant to see his parents?

"Yeah. Do you think you can get away from the family this evening?"

"Probably." I didn't think it would be too hard to slip away.

"There's a bar downtown," he told me. His voice was softer now, more like the Mac I knew and loved. "O'Grady's"

That would be one of the bars I'd seen when we were walking through Galway. "I think I saw that earlier today."

"I'm about two and a half hours away."

"Okay, I'm sure I can get away by then." If nothing else I'd walk out the door. I didn't think they could stop me.

"There's a—" his voice caught for a second, then he continued. "There's a booth in the back corner. On the back wall of the booth are the initials C. and A. B. Sit there, I'll find you."

He must have remembered more during the day. "Okay." I closed my eyes and wished the hours were already gone. "You want me to come alone? I know Corrine wants to talk to you."

"Perhaps you and Corrine," he agreed. "Do you have any idea what she wants to talk to me about?"

I'd say I had an idea. "Oh, just some things I wouldn't explain to her," I told him slowly. "I figured it would be better for you to explain to her."

"Such as...?"

"Your current condition."

"Ah."

"I thought it would be best for someone in that condition to explain it." I sure as hell didn't want to be the one to do it. How do you tell your daughter that her father was a vampire? I didn't, Mac would have to do that.

"Very well. I'll see you later."

"Okay."

"I love you."

I liked hearing that even though I couldn't help but wonder how many more times I'd hear it before we had to part ways. "I love you too," I told him. "I'll see you in about two and a half hours then."

"Goodbye," he said pointedly.

I laughed. "Goodbye." I hung up the phone and put it away. When I turned around, Corrine was standing in the doorway. "Hi."

"He's here I take it," she said softly.

"Well, he's in the country, anyway." I didn't know where, but at least he was closer than he'd been last night.

"He's coming?"

She sounded so hopeful that I had to smile. "He wants us to meet him in a bar in Galway in a couple of hours."

"He's not going to come here?"

I walked over and took her hand. "He's not sure yet," I told her gently.

She obviously didn't agree, but what could she say? "Okay, so we should probably sneak out then."

"Well, not right away," I said. "We've got a couple of hours, he's quite a little bit away. Maybe in two hours we can get out of here. In the mean time we should go back for more stories of Galway."

She smiled. "Okay. I hope he comes to see them, they're wonderful people."

"They are." Well, some of them were, anyway. "I hope he comes too, but he's got to do what he's got to do."

"I don't understand why he wouldn't," she said as we walked down the stairs.

I didn't either. "I'm sure he'll explain." To both of us.

FAMILY

I KNOW I CAN'T HOLD THE HATE INSIDE MY MIND
'CAUSE WHAT CONSUMES YOUR THOUGHTS CONTROLS YOUR LIFE
WHAT IF — CREED

At ten, Corrine asked Alaster if we could use his car to run into town. He was already doting on her, so of course he said yes. She drove and by ten thirty we pulled into the parking lot next to O'Grady's.

I felt the vamp the moment we walked in the door and it only took me a second to spot him sitting at the corner table. I wasn't worried though because I knew right away that it was Mac. He'd beaten us there and ordered our drinks by the look of it.

I pointed out the table to Corrine and she followed me across the room. I let her slide into the booth across from Mac where a bottle of wine and a crystal glass waited for her. When I saw the pot of coffee and the mug on the table, I smiled.

As I started to slide into the booth across from Mac, I saw something strange on his face and stopped. He'd grown a goatee and a mustache since I'd last seen him and it surprised me.

"I like the drama there," Corrine said hesitantly, almost as if she wasn't sure how he'd react to her. It was the first time she'd spent time with him knowing he was her father.

"Grew that quick, didn't you?" I asked as I sat down. I didn't understand how he'd done it.

"I have my ways," he replied with a smile.

I looked down at the cup in front of me. "Is this coffee or something strange?" I didn't want to be surprised by something that tasted horrible.

"Coffee," he assured me. "Black. Hot. Lots of it."

"It's not like I drink that much coffee," I said as I took a sip. I ignored the looks I got from both of them and sat my cup down. I was well aware of my caffeine addiction, but how else was I supposed to keep the hours I did without it? "How was the drive?"

"Uneventful."

"Where'd you leave Jax?" I didn't see him anywhere and I really didn't think Mac would have brought to the bar knowing Corrine would be there.

"With the plane."

That surprised me. "He's just gonna stay there and wait?"

"Yes, he's going to take in the sights," he replied. "I believe Ireland is one place he's never been."

I shrugged. "At least we're taking him someplace new."

"Instead of the other way around," he agreed. He smiled at Corrine. "How are you my dear?"

"Fine," she replied politely. "And yourself?"

"Same as ever."

I hid my amusement in the coffee cup. Like he'd be any different, he hadn't changed in twenty years, other than the teeth and the body temperature.

Mac lit up a cigarette, then offered the pack to Corrine and me. We both refused, but I could feel Corrine watching us, gauging our reactions to her and each other.

"So did you remember this place?" I asked Mac.

"Yes, didn't you see the initials?" He gestured toward the wall behind me.

I turned around to look at the wall. Engraved there was the initials 'C.B. & A.B.' and beneath that was '9-14-78'. September 14, 1978. That was the day before I'd turned around in the Memphis and seen Mac sitting next to Glenn, watching me.

Slowly I turned back to him, blinking away the film of tears that had filled my eyes. How hard must it be for him to sit where he'd once sat with Angus and not remember him? Or did he? He'd certainly remembered this place.

Corrine leaned over to look at the initials then turned to Mac. "Who is—is C.B. you?" she asked. "Who is—oh that must be...."

"My brother."

"U-uncle Angus?" Once again she'd spoken hesitantly, almost as if she expected someone to correct her.

I'd hoped to tell Mac that she knew the truth before she'd brought it up, but I couldn't get that lucky. I could feel Mac looking at me, but I dropped my eyes and took another drink of my coffee. It wasn't until he nudged me under the table that I looked up.

"Corrine's been talking to your family," I told him softly.

His head went up in half a nod and he turned back to her. "Yes, that would be Angus."

I felt like I was on display when she watched me fill my coffee cup. I knew she was unsure about Mac's opinion of her, but I didn't know how to tell her that everything would be all right.

"How old were you when you came to America?" she asked after a long minute.

"Thirty two," he replied.

She frowned. "How old are you now?"

When he said, "Much older," I rolled my eyes. If she could do the math, she'd figure out that he was over fifty.

"Funny," she said slowly. "You don't look much older."

"The members of my clan age well," he told her.

Unfortunately I was sipping at my coffee when he said that and I choked.

Corrine shot me a thoughtful look. "I didn't hear anyone back at the farm saying anything about clan Tremere."

Which earned me the same kind of look from Mac. "It's an extended family thing," he said softly.

Maybe it would be better if they were left alone to discuss this. "I'm going to go to the restroom," I murmured. "I'll be back in a minute." I got up and exited, stage left even.

After I'd used the facilities, I splashed water on my face. This was it, the night I'd done my best to put off for twenty years. Tonight Corrine would find out that vampires were real and as a special bonus surprise, that her father was one. I wasn't sure I wanted to see how she'd react to that news.

What was more important was how I'd react to it. I didn't know if I could hide how I felt about vamps, but I knew I had to try. And anyway, did I really hate all of them so much anymore? Some of them weren't so bad, and I'd met some pretty horrible humans and Garou in my life. I didn't hate all of them, did I?

I shook my head and told myself it didn't matter what I thought about vamps anymore. What mattered was that Corrine didn't hate them, that she stayed safe. Staying safe meant not hunting Kindred. I'd do anything I had to in order to keep her from that.

When I came out of the bathroom I stood around a corner and listened to their conversation, hoping that he'd already told her and I wouldn't have to see the look on her face when she found out he was a vampire.

"I know that you have amnesia because of that accident," Corrine was saying, "and that before the accident you were a mage like I am and Siofra and...."

"Glenn, and Jared," Mac continued.

"And grandmother and grandfather." She seemed very hesitant to use those words, almost as if she wasn't sure he approved of her doing it. "She said that you're Kindred but she didn't tell me what that means. That's all she'll tell me."

"About anything?"

"Well," she said shyly, "I know that you're my father."

I peeked around the corner in time to see his face soften. "There is that."

"I know that Eliza's mother is the same as you," she added.

"Yes." He couldn't have liked that one but he was still being patient with her.

"Whatever that means," she murmured.

He snuffed his cigarette out and took a sip of his scotch. "You know the words but not the meanings."

"Basically," she agreed.

"What other words do you know? Has she told you of Garou?"

"She said that Uncle Angus was Garou." This time she seemed a little more sure about calling him that.

"And Cara and Bobby and Stephen," Mac added.

"Yes. I know about Wraiths, too." She thought for a moment then said, "Grandmother and Grandfather were talking about the fae today but I'm not really sure what that means. I know of the mage traditions Verbena and Dreamspeakers." She must have heard about that from Jared, I hadn't mentioned them.

"Yes."

Obviously he wasn't going to tell her, or maybe he was waiting for me to come back. Either way, the bartender was giving me strange looks so I knew I couldn't stay where I was. I went back to the table and sat down, glancing from Mac to Corrine.

Mac seemed relieved that I was back. "You know that werewolves are real, and the witches."

"Uh-huh," Corrine replied. She didn't seem sure where this was leading.

"The fairies are the fae." He sighed and looked away. "Vampires are real too."

Corrine looked questioningly at me and I met her gaze reluctantly. From the corner of my eye I saw Mac slowly turn to look at our daughter.

"So this has something to do with your accident?" she asked him.

"Yes."

We sat there looking at her, waiting for her to figure it out.

Finally she leaned forward. "So you're telling me that you're a vampire?" she asked in a hushed voice.

"Yes," Mac replied calmly, but I knew he was waiting for her to freak out. I was too.

She sat back and drained the rest of the wine in her glass. Mac picked up the bottle and refilled it to the rim and she downed half of that before setting her glass down. There was a stunned look on her face. When Mac offered her a cigarette, she took that too.

"Well, you know, I always wanted to know about my parents," she said at last. "So Eliza, if you're gonna tell me you have a second head or something I'm sure now's the perfect time to tell me."

I was proud of the way she was taking this. It was obviously a shock to her, but she was handling it well. There was one other thing I had to tell her, but I didn't think it would knock her over the edge.

"Well you know," I said slowly, "the only other thing would be that my mother was a vampire when I was born."

She stared at me for a moment. "Okay, I was only kidding. What the hell does that mean?"

I looked at Mac, but his face told me I was on my own. "It means that I don't age like other people," I explained. "That I'm stronger and faster and can do certain things that normal people can't do."

She sighed with relief. "Okay, well I knew that already."

"Then you knew all there was," I told her with a smile.

"Do you drink blood too?"

"Not." For the record that would be an emphatic 'not'.

She looked at Mac. "Well wait a minute, I guess I shouldn't assume that. Do you drink blood?"

"Yes," he admitted. "That portion of the tales is true. I need vitae to sustain myself."

"Okay," she said with a nod, "so is there anything else that's true? What else about the whole Hollywood genre is right?"

Mac and I looked at each other, for a moment at a loss for what to say. When he didn't answer her, I did.

"Sunlight, fire, decapitation." I said that almost without thinking. If there was anything I knew about Kindred it was how to destroy them.

"Stakes don't kill," Mac added softly, "they incapacitate."

While Corrine looked at her father, I took a drink of my coffee. It occurred to me that I'd been too quick to tell her how to kill Kindred. When Mac offered me a cigarette, I took it.

I felt Corrine watching me again. "You tend to like stakes," she said slowly, "and have them and so on and so forth. What exactly do you do at St Stephen's?"

"Um, well I told you already." Damn, I wasn't ready for this. "Everything I told you was true, you just have a few more details filled in now."

"But you kill people like Mac?"

What could I say? "Only the really bad ones," I replied. When she looked at me blankly, I added, "You know, there are good people and bad people...."

She sighed. "Okay, obviously Jared has left a few things out."

Which was a damn good thing. I can't imagine what he would have told her about vamps. Actually I could, that was what scared me.

"Is that where you got all the money from?" she asked suddenly.

I wiped every expression from my face and looked at her as calmly as I possibly could given the circumstances. "What money?"

She gave me her 'don't lie to me' look, but I wasn't budging. She didn't need to know where the money came from.

"What money?" I repeated.

She looked at Mac and I saw him reaching into the inside pocket of his jacket. I tried to tell him with my eyes to leave the contract out of this, but he was looking at our daughter.

"It's a simple question," she told me.

"Yeah," I agreed. "What money?"

"My trust fund?" she said impatiently.

"Yeah, we know you have a trust fund."

"And where does the money come from?" she asked insistently.

I sighed and looked down into my coffee cup. "Somebody who obviously wants you to have a good life."

She shook her head. "And since Mac didn't know about me until about a week ago and you've always been around, you've always had nothing, you've never let me do anything for you...."

And how exactly did that make it obvious the money came from me? I glared at Mac; this was his fault somehow, I just knew it. She'd inherited every bit of her stubbornness from him.

"So you've basically risked your life every night," she continued, "gone without, obviously gotten paid handsomely—"

"Is money handsome?" I asked Mac with a frown, trying to change the subject any way I could. This was the last thing I wanted to talk to her about, ever.

"Why?" Corrine demanded.

"I never said any of that," I told her softly. When Mac pulled the contract out of his pocket I knew I'd have to tell her something or he'd give her the damn thing.

"Why?" There was a hurt little girl note to her voice that made me want to cry.

I glared at Mac for a moment before turning in the seat to face her. "Do you remember when we went to New York?" I asked softly. I hadn't told Mac about that trip and I wasn't sure I wanted to, but I had no choice if I was going to explain this.

"Yes," she replied.

"Do you remember when I tried to tell you how important you were to me?" I wasn't sure she would, she'd been a teenager at the time, not really into listening.

"Yes."

"That's how important you are," I said firmly, meaning every word. "It's important to me that you are taken care of."

"To the point where you have this miserable life?" she demanded.

That surprised me. "I haven't had a miserable life," I told her. Where in hell had she gotten that idea? "Look, I'm happy." And I was. Here in this bar on the coast of Ireland was everything I have ever wanted out of life: Mac and our daughter, the three of us together as a family.

I could see the wheels turning in her head. "That's why you couldn't stay in Bar Harbor?"

"Yes," I replied sadly. "That's why I couldn't stay."

"When did you start?"

"When I couldn't stay in Bar Harbor," I said simply. "When I moved to Bangor." That had been the first place the Society had stationed me.

"So you let me think that you didn't care about me—"

"I did not let you think that I didn't care about you," I interrupted sternly. "I tried to show you how much I cared about you if you remember correctly. Hence the whole trip to New York."

"Yeah," she murmured dryly. "I remember thinking that you still—" She broke off in mid sentence and turned away to sip at her wine.

"I tried to tell you," I said sadly, "but you were too young to listen." She'd also been too mad at me to listen.

"You could have told me," she bit out still not looking at me. "You could have told me anything."

She could say that now, but the truth was that she never would have understood, not in a million years. I still didn't think she'd understand if she knew the truth. "I tried to tell you what I thought you would understand."

I could tell she was remembering everything about that trip when a look of guilt crossed her face. She glanced anxiously at Mac, I'm sure wondering if I'd told him about it.

"What happened?" he asked softly.

She closed her eyes and winced. "We just visited a homeless shelter there," she said a little too quickly

"Just?" He looked at me expectantly.

"Why are you trying to steer this conversation away from the money?" she demanded, trying to steer the conversation away from her past.

"What happened?" Mac asked me in a low voice.

"I took her to New York to show her the real world," I told him. "After she tried to find the real world in Portland."

He kept looking at me, waiting for the rest of the story. Corrine picked up her glass and drank some more, probably thinking I was going to tell him everything.

I wasn't going to, at least not here. "It was just a minor excursion when Corrine decided to run away and I had to find her." Maybe some other time I'd tell him the full story. Maybe.

"In New York?" he asked.

"No, in Portland. I took her to New York to show her the real world." When he made a questioning noise, I added, "After I convinced Tommy that he should leave her the hell alone."

"Tommy?" He was losing patience, I could tell.

Corrine could too. "All right, all right," she said soothingly.

"Who's Tommy?" he demanded.

"He was just a phase," she said quickly.

"A phase?" He gave me a hard look. "Who was Tommy?"

Mac was sure turning out to be the protective father I'd always pictured he'd be, but he was a few years too late for this one. "He was from Bar Harbor," I told him.

"And how much convincing did it take?"

I almost didn't tell him, but I knew I couldn't lie to him. "Well after he found out that I fought my way through his pack and won, not too much at all," I admitted. "You know the whole hierarchy of the Garou type deal."

"He was Garou?" Corrine asked, shocked.

"No, he wasn't. He was kinfolk," I told her. When I saw the confused look on her face, I added, "And I didn't get that far. His family had Garou members but he was not actually Garou."

"Okay," she said slowly.

"It runs in families," I explained. Then a thought occurred to me. "Although you know technically, I mean it runs in your family so...." I looked at Mac questioningly. Was Corrine kinfolk?

"So does other things," he reminded me. "Mage, Dhampyr, Garou."

"So that's why they were so...." Her voice dropped off and I knew what she was thinking.

"Happy," I finished. His family had been almost ecstatic when they thought Corrine was pregnant. I hadn't shared in their enthusiasm, and luckily it had been a false alarm. "Although they weren't by the time I got done with them."

"Oh, God," she said suddenly. "Can you imagine if they had known that?"

"Good thing they didn't," I told her. If they had known Corrine had Garou blood in her, I might not have been able to get her away from them at all.

"Would I be considered this 'kinfolk'?" she asked Mac. "Because of Uncle Angus?"

"You may not be kinfolk," he said thoughtfully, "but the delirium would be lessened."

She was losing the last of her patience. "What the hell is delirium?"

"It's the tendency to freak out when they get big and furry," I told her.

"In mortals," Mac corrected, "not in kinfolk."

"So I wouldn't?" She was trying so hard to understand.

"You'd be less likely to." I didn't know if that was a good thing or not, if she ran from a Crinos Garou, at least she'd be out of claws reach.

"Oh." She thought about that for a moment. "Well that's good to know, I guess. Which still doesn't explain the whole money situation."

Trust her to bring that topic back up. I looked helplessly at Mac, hoping he would do something to distract her.

"You're not that good," she told me bluntly.

"What about the money?" I asked, pretending confusion. "I'm sorry, I thought we were done talking about it."

"It came from you, right?" she insisted.

"I didn't say that," I told her. Of course I didn't *not* say that.

She frowned. "I know you're—"

"Avoiding," I finished with her.

Mac started turning the contract in his hands as if he wanted to give it to her. Why in hell would he want to do that? It wouldn't do any good for Corrine to see it; I knew damn well that it would only hurt her to know what I'd done to keep her safe.

"She's going to find out eventually, luv," he said softly.

"Is that something that would—" She reached across the table for it, but I grabbed her hand.

"I don't think you need to see that," I told her firmly.

"Not yet," Mac agreed as he put it back in his jacket.

"Not ever," I insisted stubbornly.

"Come on," she pleaded. "I'm nineteen years old."

"And when you're fifty we'll give that to you," I said firmly.

She sat back sulkily. "So do mom and dad know?"

"Know what?" I asked. I knew the Wrights had been her parents her entire life and that would never change for her, but it still hurt to hear her say that. Hell, it had hurt every single time I'd heard it in the last nineteen years.

"Whatever information is in that letter," she said.

I laughed at the very idea of them knowing about the contract. At the same time Mac and I said very firmly, "No."

She didn't look happy. "Until you feel you can trust me, I guess I'll have to wait."

"It's not a matter of trust," I protested.

"Sure it is."

"No, it's not." Okay, we were sounding like a couple of kids. Time to change the subject. "By the way, what's the drinking age in Ireland?"

"I don't know," she said defensively. "It was just sitting here in front of me. Mac would know."

"It was seventeen when I was here," he told us. "Legally, we've known the O'Grady's for a while."

"I'm surprised someone hasn't recognized you," I murmured.

"Someone has," he admitted. "I've been gone long enough that there are not a lot of people that recognize me like this." He gestured toward the hair on his face.

"I take it that's why you don't want to come see grandmother and grandfather," Corrine said softly.

He looked away. "I'm not sure how they will take my... being Kindred."

"Well, they know already, don't they?" She looked at me for confirmation.

"Knowing and seeing are two different things," he reminded her.

"Are you planning on going in with fangs bared?" I asked dryly.

"I don't think that's a good idea," Corrine told him.

I had to agree. "I think Cara would like that too much. By the way you could have warned me that she was a b-it difficult to deal with." It probably wasn't a good idea to be calling her names.

"Yes, she is," he commented.

Corrine looked down at her glass. "I don't understand why they have such an attitude with Eliza," she said softly.

That was a topic I wasn't touching. I looked at Mac. "You really should have warned me."

"I thought you'd picked that up," he murmured with a smile.

"I was busy trying not to stake her," I told him. "I'm sorry."

That made him grin. "It would just have pissed her off."

"I thought about the silver laced knife," I admitted with a shrug, "but I thought your parents would be a little mad if I stabbed their daughter-in-law in their house."

"So why don't we just go over there right now?" Corrine broke in.

"No." The tone of his voice said that he wasn't open to debate the issue.

"I know that grandmother is really wanting to see you," she protested.

"She is," I added.

"So is grandfather."

He looked down into his glass broodingly. "There are a few things I'd like to take care of before I see the rest of the family."

"Like what?" For real now, I'd thought that she'd learned tact at some point, but obviously I was wrong.

"A few people to visit," he replied dismissively.

"Like...?"

"Ghosts from the past," he said finally.

"Like Uncle Angus?" She'd hit the nail on the head. "Grandmother told me he's buried in the family plot. I'd like to go with you."

"I don't know," he said uncertainly.

"Wouldn't that put you really close to the house anyway?" I asked. I knew he was anxious about seeing his parents, but the sooner he got it over with, the more time he could spend with them before we had to be back to Salem.

"Then you could just come over afterwards," Corrine added encouragingly.

"I know a back way in," he said looking at me.

"Well, we'll follow you." The girl just did not know how to take no for an answer. She got that from her father.

When Mac shot me an annoyed look, I told him simply, "She's your daughter."

He laughed. "I was thinking the same thing."

I tried not to laugh with him. "I'm not the one stubborn here, that would be all you."

"That's a lie," Corrine said firmly. I really had to talk to her about tact.

"I'm just set in my ways," Mac told me, hiding a smile.

Corrine interrupted our finger pointing. "So you gonna finish that drink and we'll go?" she asked him, gesturing toward his glass.

He pushed it away. "Doesn't do me any good anyway." The look he gave me told me he was remembering when he'd fed from me.

I remembered it too, and felt the blood rush to my face. I let my hair fall forward like a shield between Corrine and me to stop her from seeing the look on my face. I met Mac's hot gaze with one of my own and wished we were alone so that he could drink from me again.

"I plan on getting more," Mac said softly. The sound of his voice gave me goose bumps.

"Can you eat too?" Corrine interrupted my brazen thoughts by asking.

"I can," he told her, still looking at me. "It does me no good."

Corrine must have thought she knew where our minds were headed. "Well, I'm glad to see you're still young and healthy I guess," she murmured under her breath.

Since neither of us are young and in fact one of us is dead, I believe she got it wrong, but I wasn't about to correct her. I picked up my coffee and took a long drink to try and control my emotions. It didn't work.

"Something like that," Mac agreed. I could still feel his eyes on me and it made me blush again.

"If you're still enjoying the finer thing in life that's all that matters," she told us. "Can we go now?" I think she was a little disgusted to think that her parents would do anything remotely sexual with each other.

"If you insist," Mac replied, standing up and throwing a twenty-dollar bill on the table.

I took one last drink of my coffee before I joined him and the three of us went outside to the parking lot.

CHILDHOOD MEMORIES

STRUCK BY THE MOON RISING TOO SOON
I FEEL A PAIN DEEP INSIDE ME
WILD FOR YOU BABY – TRISHA YEARWOOD

Mac stopped when the door closed behind us and looked around the lot.

"That one," I told him, pointing to Alaster's car. When he headed toward his bike, I turned to Corrine. "Are you going to follow us?"

She seemed a little surprised at first, and then a stubborn look crossed her face. "Yeah, go corroborate your stories." She turned and walked toward the car leaving me alone with Mac.

I shook my head; I hadn't planned any such thing except to tell Mac that I didn't want Corrine to see the contract. Mac handed me the helmet and I put it on as he buttoned his jacket. "So you know where we're going, right?"

"Of course," he said, like I shouldn't doubt him. He started the bike and pulled onto the road with Corrine following close behind. The low speed limit made it possible for us to talk over the sound of the bike's engine. "You know she will find out sooner or later," he told me over his shoulder.

I didn't agree. "Who says?"

"Don't you think she'll have questions when the money stops?"

I didn't like to think about that and I was surprised he did; the money wouldn't stop until either Ford or I was dead. "We'll burn that bridge when we get there."

"I am working on a way to get you out of your contract," he surprised me by saying.

How did he expect to do that? "What," I said harshly, "you think you can just tell Ford I want out of my contract and he'll go 'Ooh, you're in love' and burn the damn thing?" Like that was going to happen.

"Ford is above all else a businessman," he told me firmly. "If he finds benefits in renegotiating then he will do so."

I didn't know if I liked the sounds of that. "What kind of renegotiating?"

"The money would have to stop."

That didn't surprise me. "I think she has enough to live off of." I didn't exactly know how much was in her trust fund, but it had to be well over three million by now.

"Yes," he agreed. "And perhaps we could get you into clan security."

"All right." That really wouldn't be much different from what I did now except it would be a lot more obvious who I worked for.

He was silent for a long moment before he added, "You might have to be ghouled."

Ghouled? Me? He had to be out of his mind. No fucking way. "Have you completely lost your mind?" I demanded.

"For Corrine's protection, Eliza," he said soothingly trying to calm me down.

Bullshit. "She's protected now." My contract protected her the same now as it had every day of the last ten years.

"But you're not," he reminded me. "You're in danger every night."

Like I didn't face that every night. "It's a fair trade." And it was. Corrine's safety was the important thing here, not mine. She was the one who mattered. And it's not like there's some old slayer's home somewhere, we all had to die sometime.

"Don't you think someone will eventually realize that you're not aging?" he demanded.

Since I'd thought about that only a few days ago, I had to admit that he had a point. Then it occurred to me that he was probably worried about me, about my safety. Now that we'd found each other it would definitely be a bitch if one of us died. And I knew it would hurt Corrine if something happened to me.

"There has to be another alternative," I said stubbornly. I really didn't like the idea of turning into Linda.

"It is possible that they would want to examine you," he told me.

I didn't like that idea either. "What do you mean 'examine'?" The last time I went willingly into a Tremere lab, I really hadn't liked the results.

"Test your strengths and abilities."

Oh, the microscope. "They'd want to study me."

"And you would have to change your attitude toward Kindred," he added.

"What do you mean?" Not that I didn't know exactly what he meant. Still, I think my attitude had changed over the last week. I'd met a lot of Kindred that didn't make me want to stake them on sight.

"You would have to stop staking Regents," he warned me.

My whole body tensed up; someone had told him that I'd been involved with Luther's death. What else did he know about it? Had he found out exactly what had happened in the chantry torture chamber? I hoped he didn't know. As much as I'd buried that experience in my mind, I still felt shame when I thought about it. Logically I knew that I couldn't have stopped them from doing what they did to me, but a part of my mind didn't really believe that.

"I didn't stake him," I denied after a long minute. I really hadn't, someone else had gotten to him first.

"What, he fell on your stake?" he asked sarcastically

"Someone else staked him before I could." I couldn't keep the tenseness out of my body or my voice, but I did try. "I just lit the match."

"They know about that," he warned me.

"I know." I'd told Ford that it had been a Society hit I couldn't stop, which technically was true. What I hadn't said was that I'd planned the hit in the first place.

"They're not happy about it," he added as he pulled into a parking area on the side of the road.

Duh. "I know that too." That had been wicked obvious when Ford came to visit me afterward. "He deserved to die."

He parked the bike and turned it off. "For Corrine's safety—"

"She's safe, Mac," I told him fiercely as I got off the bike and almost tore the helmet from my head. I knew all about Corrine's safety, I'd lived and breathed her safety for the last twenty years. "I destroyed him and I'd do it again if I had the chance. He deserved it." I hung the helmet on the back of the bike and stalked away toward where Corrine had parked.

"That is exactly the type of attitude I'm talking about," he called after me. "And you're going the wrong way."

I stopped and waited for Corrine to catch up with me knowing that Mac and I would never agree on my attitude toward Luther. He would probably change his mind if I told him the details of my nights in that dungeon, but I didn't want him to know those details. I'd lived

through it and I'd handled it and Luther would never order that kind of punishment again. Ever.

Corrine walked over to me and we followed we followed him into the woods. She must have noticed my tenseness, but she didn't say anything. We walked down the slightly overgrown path with the bright moon lighting our way. At one point the path forked and Mac turned toward the farmhouse.

After five minutes or so we found ourselves at the back of a small fenced graveyard. There were about fifteen headstones inside the fence and an archway over a gate opposite us. The trail led right to the fence where there were several pickets missing, giving us access to the yard without having to walk around to the gate.

Mac stood at the opening of the fence and stared broodingly at the stones. Corrine glanced at me, but I had no idea what he was waiting for. Finally she walked up beside him and took his hand. When his fingers closed on hers, she tried to lead him through the fence, but he just let go of her hand. She turned around and looked at him questioningly.

He glanced at her then looked down at the fence thoughtfully. "It could be warded against Kindred."

I took a second look around but I didn't see anything. "Would there be a reason that they would ward it?"

"I don't remember." He sounded worried as he looked intently at the graveyard, but I'm not sure what he expected to see. The moon wasn't that bright.

"You know," I suggested, "some spooky-boo that would require something from a graveyard?"

He shrugged. "Not Tremere." After a moment he took one step inside the fence, then another. When he'd moved in a few feet, I followed him.

He paused at one of the obviously newer headstones, but the name on it was Patrick Brennan. Vaguely I remembered that he was an uncle Mac had mentioned a long time ago.

Toward the front of the cemetery was a fairly recent grave. Mac walked around to the front of the tombstone and stood looking down at it for a long time. Corrine and I moved to either side of him and looked down at it too.

Across the top of stone were three Garou symbols. The first meant Stargazer, a tribe of Garou. The second stood for Philodox, and the third meant Homid. Beneath that was the name 'Angus Brennan' and underneath that was 'Dream-Warrior.' The dates read '12/29/50 – 5/3/99.' Across the bottom of the stone was the phrase, 'Beloved Son, Father, Brother and Husband.'

After a long time Mac pulled a whisky bottle from his backpack and opened it. He took a long drink then handed it to me. I knew what he wanted me to do, we'd done it at Paul's funeral before his relatives had taken his body away. I took a long drink from the bottle and handed it back. When he gave it to Corrine, she took a small drink and almost choked on it before handing the bottle back to him.

He knelt on the ground and I watched him lean the bottle against the headstone wondering what he was thinking. I knew he'd been close to Angus, and he'd only missed seeing him again by four months. When you think about it four months out of twenty years really wasn't a lot of time.

I put my hand on his shoulder. I knew how hard it was to mourn a loved one. Hadn't I mourned Mac for twenty years? I couldn't imagine what it would have been like to lose a sibling; I'd never had one.

A few minutes later I heard something coming from the direction of the farmhouse. I turned to look and saw that Corrine had done the same. Mac also turned in that direction. Even in the dim moonlight I could see that it was Alaster.

Apparently Corrine could too. She cleared her throat and put her hand on Mac's shoulder. "Grandfather," she said hesitantly. "What are you doing up here?"

Mac turned back to the headstone. Did he think by turning away he could avoid his father?

"I wanted to take a walk before I turned in," Alaster replied. "This is where my wanderings usually take me. What are you doing up here, Corrine? Eliza?" He nodded in my direction then saw the man kneeling next to me. "Who's out there with you?"

I looked down at Mac, knowing it was his call to make. I hoped he'd make the right one; he'd been away from his family for way too long already.

When Mac didn't say anything, Corrine hesitantly tried to explain. "It's-it's someone that has come to—"

"It's me," Mac said, interrupting her.

"Macalaster?" His father seemed shocked for a moment but he recovered himself quickly. "Let me see you, boy."

Mac stood up slowly still facing Angus' grave. Alaster walked closer to us but stopped when he was about five feet away. Very slowly Mac turned to face his father for the first time since his embrace.

I could see the hope in Alaster's eyes, the eagerness to see his lost son once again. He studied Mac in the half-light of the moon and after a moment his face filled with pride. He stepped forward with his hands held out and tears in his eyes. He pulled his son into a hug that Mac willingly returned.

"It's good to see you again, Macalaster," he admitted gruffly. "I'm glad to see you've come home." After a long moment he pulled back to arms length and glance back at the headstone. "He died with honor," he said sadly of Angus. "It was the way he would have wanted it to have happened."

"So I heard," Mac replied neutrally.

"I'm not gonna ask you how you fared because that's pretty obvious," Alaster told him. When Mac smiled, he asked, "Have you had a good life son?"

"As well as I knew, yes," Mac replied.

Alaster looked from Mac and Corrine, I'm sure noting the similarities in their features. "You've done well by the family, son." He held a hand out for Corrine and she took it with a smile. "I'm sure your ma will be anxious to see you. Come on back to the house now." Alaster turned toward the house, but Mac's voice stopped him.

"Not yet." When Alaster stopped and turned to look at him, he added, "Perhaps tomorrow night."

His father seemed a little upset at that. "You'll deny her even seeing you?"

"No, I won't deny her. I just..." His voice trailed off as if he didn't know how to explain.

Alaster seemed to understand. "Where are you staying?"

"The boarding house downtown," he replied.

"You'll be out first thing tomorrow night then?"

"Yes."

"That is a promise?"

"You have my word," Mac said gravely.

That seemed to satisfy him. "That is good enough for me then." Mac looked a little surprised that his word was enough, but Alaster didn't notice. He turned to Corrine. "Will you be coming back to the farm soon?" We did have his car.

"We'll be back soon," she assured him.

"Corrine will be back," I corrected her.

She shot me a knowing grin, but Mac looked down at me in surprise. I met his gaze firmly; there was no way he was getting rid of me.

"Where will you be staying?" he asked slowly.

"With you," I said simply. We only had a week left and I was going to spend every minute of it with him that I could.

"Won't you be needing any of your things? Clothes?"

I didn't need clothes for the things I had in mind. "Are we going out to dinner or something like that?"

"Personal items?" he suggested.

"I can bring something into town in the morning," Corrine volunteered.

"That would be great," I told her with a grin.

"Something to sleep in?" Mac added.

"For what?" Hell, last night I'd slept in my clothes, why should tonight be any different?

"We parked the car down the path there," Corrine said to her grandfather. "Do you want to walk with me and we'll drive back together?"

He shot Mac a knowing look. "Ah, the old path. Seems you've been remembering some more boy. If you don't mind I'll walk with you."

"I was planning on going to the point," Mac told him.

Alaster nodded. "I'll walk as far as the fork with you then."

"Certainly." Mac took one last look at Angus' headstone, then brought two fingers to his lips and touched the top of the stone as he walked past. He took my hand and led me toward the path.

Corrine chatted with Alaster while we walked through the woods, but Mac and I were silent. I knew he was thinking of his family, and I was thinking of them too. To be truthful, I was more than happy I didn't have to spend another night with them, no matter how nice his parents were.

We stopped at the fork in the path and Mac turned to hug Corrine. "I'll see you in the morning," he told her.

She seemed surprised. "You'll see me in the morning?"

He shot me an amused look. "Don't I have this argument with you?"

I laughed. "It's evening, Mac," I corrected him. "You'll see her in the evening."

"That all depends on your point of view," he murmured.

I ignored his protest and hugged Corrine myself.

"I'll see you—" she began.

"In the morning," I finished with a look at Mac.

He smiled at his father. "Smart arses."

Alaster chuckled, obviously pleased to see that we got along so well. It was like he'd never expected Mac to be in a relationship like this, which since he'd thought Mac was dead, kind of made sense.

"I'll see you next evening," Mac said with a pointed look at me as they shook hands. When Alaster smiled and nodded, Mac pulled him in for a hug. "She takes after her mother," he added as they pulled apart.

When Corrine and Alaster had moved off toward the car, I had to make a final comment for Mac's ears alone. "She takes after you."

TIME ALONE

NOW CLOSE YOUR EYES AND LET ME KISS YOU
AND WHEN YOU SLEEP I WILL MISS YOU
FALLING INTO YOU – CELINE DION

We walked through the woods for several minutes, mostly going uphill. When we reached the summit it was like walking off into oblivion. The trail led to a finger of rock that jutted out over the ocean. The moon shone down on the water, and it looked like we could see for miles down either side of the coast.

Mac led me to the edge and stood looking out over the ocean. I wondered what he was thinking, if he was thinking of Angus. Maybe he was wondering how to ditch me.

"Did you have a problem with me staying with you?" I hoped he didn't, I wasn't leaving.

"No luv," he assured me.

"I had the feeling you were trying to get rid of me again."

"Nonsense," he told me. "If I was trying to get rid of you, I wouldn't have come after you."

"Good point," I replied, more than a little relieved.

"Twice," he agreed.

The moonlight was very beautiful on the water. This place was peaceful, but I wondered what it would be like in a storm with waves crashing and lightning and the wind blowing you away.

"So," I said after a long moment, "why didn't you want to go see your mother?"

"She's not as levelheaded as my father," he said softly. "She may react a bit worse."

"What, you think she's going to stake you?" I don't think the woman had that in her.

"No." He thought for a moment then glanced at me. "Cara might."

"No, we've had that discussion," I told him.

"Oh, really?"

I smiled. "Well, lets just say we almost had that discussion, and I told her we wouldn't be having that discussion."

"Ah, you had a discussion about having that discussion," he said dryly.

"More or less, yeah."

"Thank you for discussing that with me."

I glanced at him, but I couldn't tell if he was really upset with me or just joking. "I was going to tell you. We really haven't had an opportunity to talk, you know, alone," I reminded him. "Anyway, we agreed not to have that discussion so she won't stake you either. There will be no staking."

"That reassures me a little bit," he murmured.

"Were you that worried about it?"

"Her staking me?"

"Being staked in general." You'd think he'd know I wouldn't let that happen. Not that we couldn't just pull the stake out and have him be just fine again.

"Not so much," he said softly. "I don't think Da would let that happen."

Like I would. "I guess I'm still not understanding why you don't want to go see your mom tonight." I knew he wanted to see her, and that she wanted to see him, so what was the big?

"Tomorrow." He looked out over the ocean with a troubled look on his face. "I just worry about how mother would react."

"It's not like she doesn't already know," I reminded him.

"There's a difference between knowing and seeing," he told me.

It wasn't like she'd feel his vampness like I could, or like he was going to go in there and bite someone. "Obviously it's your choice," I replied "I'm just as glad to get out of there anyhow."

"Oh, my family's not that bad, are they?"

"Most of them aren't," I admitted with a smile. "Your parents are nice."

"Just my parents?" he drawled.

Actually, yes. I didn't like his sister and Cara was a little too alpha for me. "Your parents are very nice," I repeated.

He chuckled, but then a sad look came over his face. "I think you would have liked Angus."

"I'm sure I would have." From the stories I'd heard I would have, anyway.

"I'm sure Angus would have liked you," he added.

"That could be debated." Maybe he would have had as big of a problem with me as Cara and Siofra did.

"That's not quite what I meant," Mac said slowly.

"What did you mean?"

"Cara is the perfect match for Angus," he told me.

Wait a minute. "Does that mean that you think I act like Cara?"

"No," he assured me. "He likes, how do you put it? Women with spunk."

"She has that." If that was what you wanted to call it, anyway. "And then some."

"And then a little more," he added.

We stood in silence for a few minutes, absorbing the beauty and peacefulness of the ocean. Even though it was the same water, it looked a lot different from the way it did in America.

"Well, shall we head back?" he asked finally.

"Sure."

He turned and switched the hand he was holding mine with. His fingertips ran along the base of my fingers and he stopped suddenly, bringing my hand up and looking down at the naked ring finger.

"Do you know what I went through to get those rings for you the second time?" he asked sharply.

Did he think I'd lost them? I hooked a finger through the chain around my neck and pulled the rings out of my shirt so he could see them. He looked down at my bare fingers pointedly, telling me without words that I should have them on my hand, not my neck.

"I just didn't know if you wanted your family to know that," I explained.

He held up his hand, which still bore his wedding ring.

How was I supposed to know he'd come into town wearing it? "Your point?" When he started walking again, I said, "You didn't tell them about me before, how was I supposed to know what you were going to do this time? It was a bit of a shock when I showed up on the

doorstep in the middle of the night. Big fucking Irish wolfhound." That last bit was muttered under my breath.

"Cara is still taking that form is she?" he asked, amused. "She always thought we were joking until Angus and I got out the tools to put in the doggie door."

I couldn't help but laugh. "At least I can rightfully call her a bitch."

"Not to her face, of course." When I didn't say anything, he repeated it slower and more forcefully.

"Well I haven't yet," I told him.

"Repeat after me," he began.

"Not to her face," I said quickly. As much as I didn't like Cara, I wasn't about to insult her. Well, not at Mac's parents house, anyway.

"Would you care to go back to the bar or go to The Salty Dog?" Mac asked. "Or Flannery's."

"I don't know," I replied. "That is entirely up to you."

"No, I've been here before," he reminded me. "It's up to you."

"Well, I've been around town earlier today so I've had the five cent tour." Galway was nice, pretty even, but when we'd gone through it earlier today there had been something missing. Now I realized that something was Mac.

"Where would you like to go?" he asked again.

It didn't matter where we went, as long as we were together. We only had a week left, just seven nights to remember for a lifetime. It didn't really matter what we did. "I don't care," I repeated.

"Back to my room?"

"That's up to you, I don't care," I told him. "Seriously, Mac."

"You don't have any clothes," he reminded me.

Not this again. "What do I need clothes for?"

He shook his head. "So will you be resuming my sleep pattern or maintaining your normal schedule?"

I shrugged. "I just figured I'd stay on yours for the next week."

"Do you really think Corrine is going to like that?" he asked. "Wouldn't she like to spend a little time with you?"

"I don't need twelve hours of sleep." Not like some people who were dead to the world from sunrise to sunset. "I've been known to get by on three or four hours of sleep and do just fine."

"As you wish," he murmured.

"There you go trying to get rid of me again," I said. I grinned up at him and waited for his reaction. It wasn't long coming.

He stopped abruptly and looked down at me. When he saw the expression on my face, he sighed. "What am I going to do with you?"

"I have a few ideas," I muttered playfully.

We walked out of the woods and over to the bike. He handed me my helmet and in short order we were both on the bike.

"So you never did answer me," he said as turned the key in the ignition. "Where would you like to go?"

"Wherever you want to go is fine," I told him. "It doesn't matter."

He turned away from town and drove into the night. It felt good to have the wind on my face and forget about my worries. We used to do this, ride off into the night together. I guess I never realized how much I'd missed the every day stuff with him. After a while I turned my head and leaned against his back. The drone of the motor and the feel of his muscles as he controlled the bike relaxed me like nothing had in a long time.

We got back into Galway around midnight, but he didn't go to his room just yet. He parked at one of those little roadside parks, the kind where you park by the road and follow a trail down to the water. That's what we did, anyway. We made our way down to the beach holding hands. At the bottom of the trail we found a weathered bench and sat down.

"So what did you do yesterday?" he asked softly.

"You mean today?" I said teasingly. "Well, as you know I got to the farmhouse last night. An Irish wolfhound greeted me at the door, so to speak. Needless to say your parents were surprised to see me. They recognized me from that picture that Stephen had and I got the third degree."

"Only the third degree?"

"Sometimes I'm good at evading answers," I reminded him with a smile. "Your mother fed me and put me to bed, more or less. You have a very interesting room," I told him. "It's exactly the way it was when you left it. The calendar still says January 1979."

"My room?"

The night was just full of surprises for him, wasn't it? "Yeah, that's where she put me."

He thought for a moment. "That would be the only empty room in the house."

"I woke up to an argument between Glenn and your father," I added.

"Oh? Care to share?"

If I didn't, would I have brought it up? "They were just arguing about why Glenn hadn't told them that you were Kindred," I said. "Or about me." Not that Mac had ever told them about me.

"How did he defend himself?"

"I believe it was my comment that it might have hurt them more to know what happened that stopped the argument," I told him. "That was when I had the conversation with Cara about not having the conversation about you and stakes. And there was some stuff about Corrine that I'm not sure I liked."

That got his interest. "Oh? What were they discussing?"

"Her training." Not that I had the slightest idea about how that should go. Yeah, I'd lived with mages, but I wasn't one, and they hadn't exactly invited me to join in their reindeer games.

"She is a mage," he reminded me, as if I could forget. "She must be trained."

I sighed. "I know."

"What is not to like about it?"

"I guess nothing." I should be excited for her.

"What didn't you like about it then?" he asked, concerned.

What could I tell him but the truth? "To be honest I guess that I'm not in control of it or involved in it or anything."

"There's nothing you can give her," he said soothingly.

"I know." And I did know. Knowing just didn't make it any easier.

"Other than her freedom to pursue this," he added.

"I know that in my head," I told him, "but in my heart that doesn't change anything."

"She's in good hands now," he said firmly. "You've both met the family and you know you have a place to stay if need be."

Corrine did, anyway. "I know that she's in the best place for her," I admitted. "But... I guess I just have to step back and stop trying to be in so much control."

"You've been her guardian for nineteen years, Eliza," he replied gently. "Let someone else take a turn."

"Yeah, I know," I whispered. And I did know, I just didn't have to like it.

He put his arm around my shoulders and pulled me close to his side. I wrapped my arms around his waist and laid my head on his shoulder. I'd spent so many years being the strong one, knowing that the only person I could count on was me. It felt good to have him to lean on, to have someone I could trust take over making the hard decisions.

"Have you been practicing any more with the gun?" he asked after a little while.

"There hasn't been an opportunity to," I reminded him.

"Maybe tomorrow night," he suggested. "Tomorrow we'll teach Corrine to shoot."

"If you can convince her to." I wasn't so sure he could. "You know she's stubborn like you are."

"Like you," he corrected.

"I'm not stubborn, I'm just set in my ways." I liked handing his own words back to him.

"You told me twenty years ago you'd never be able to shoot a gun," he said softly.

"And for twenty years I haven't been able to," I replied.

"But you are carrying one," he reminded me.

"So? You agreed with me twenty years ago that I'd never be able to shoot a gun."

"No I didn't," he denied.

"You gave up trying to teach me." Sounded like agreeing to me.

"I didn't agree with you though."

"I thought the whole giving up thing was agreement enough."

We heard voices at the top of the hill and I turned to see that another couple had started down the trail. They were talking a little loudly and were unsteady as they walked down, so I figured they were drunk.

Mac got to his feet and led me back toward the bike. I'd noticed him limping a little when we came down, but now that limp was more pronounced. I put my arm around his waist to help him balance, but he wouldn't put any of his weight on me.

We passed the other couple about half way up and I could smell alcohol pretty strong. They probably had no business walking on a deserted beach drunk, but it wasn't my call.

"I could use a drink," I heard Mac murmur as the couple passed us. I looked up in surprise, but he was looking at them and didn't seem to notice. If he was hungry, maybe we could do something about that. Even thinking about it made my heart beat faster.

We got back on the bike and he took us to the boarding house he was staying at where he parked behind the building. The stairs were a little steep and once more I was reminded that his leg was still hurt.

"When are you gonna heal that?" I asked him.

"I started healing," he said with a glance at the leg. "These things take time, and blood."

"It's not like you can go down to the local five and dime for it," I commented wryly.

"Not unless they have special clerks," he muttered. "Which reminds me, I owe you for pushing me out of the way."

Why did he owe me for that? "What was I supposed to do, let him hit you straight on?" If I had that bullet might have exploded in a more vital area. I didn't like to think about that.

He opened the door to his room and stepped back to let me through first. "I was just saying thank you."

"You owe me," I murmured as I walked inside. "I'll have to remember that."

I looked around the small living space that held a small table, a television and a love seat. On the table was a hot pad and a coffee pot. It was a fairly decent room, just small. Through one door I could see a half bath, through another was an even smaller bedroom.

"I said thank you," Mac reminded me.

"Thank you doesn't necessarily pay it back," I said, turning my back to him to hide my teasing smile.

"You remember the alleyway in Berlin?" he asked. "I figure that repays it."

"You don't have to be so huffy," I teased, grinning at him.

He smiled. "What would you do with a debt anyway?"

"I don't know." But I'm sure I could think of something....

"I've told you everything you wanted to know," he said softly as he took his jacket off and laid it on the table.

"Almost everything." There was one little thing.

"Oh?"

"You never did tell me what happened in the cave after I was thrown over a very large Garou's shoulder and dragged kicking and screaming away," I reminded him as I walked around the room getting a feel for the space.

"Yes I did," he protested as he laid his guns on top of his jacket. "I killed Earl."

"Just killing Earl isn't something that I couldn't see." He was acting like I was some naïve child. It wasn't as if I'd never seen a vamp die before.

"I killed him in a little more dramatic way," he admitted.

My eyebrows shot up. "What, did you get up and go...." I pulled a stake and pretended to start staking something then stop a few times half way through. "No, wait for it," I added, then pretended to stake again.

"No," he said, laughing. It was good to hear him laugh.

"You said dramatically," I reminded him. I sat the stake down on top of the television.

"No, far from it," he told me as he calmed down.

"Why then?"

He finished disarming himself and sat down on the love seat with a sigh. "I diablerized him."

"Huh?" I'd never heard the word before.

"Diablerie is one of the most heinous crimes a Kindred can commit," he told me.

My eyebrows rose again. "So you ran right out and did it?"

"If committed without the prince's approval," he added.

"Oh, that was the whole call to Faith." It hadn't made sense at the time. "Okay, what is it?"

"It is when a higher generation Kindred drains and kills a lower generation Kindred," he explained as if that should answer all my questions.

"Mac, I've seen you feed before," I reminded him. Hell, he'd fed from me. "What's the big deal?"

He looked a little uncomfortable. "There was every chance that I would frenzy."

"I had a stake." Like I was ever without one.

"So did Glenn."

"I still don't see the urgency of getting me out of the cave." I didn't get what the big deal was; it wasn't like I'd never seen a vamp frenzy. Or frenzied myself for that matter.

"I didn't want you to see it," he said sincerely.

I nodded reluctantly. I guess I could understand that he didn't want me to see him go off like that. Frenzy is not a pretty sight.

"It's a crime because it lowers the generation of the Kindred committing the act," he told me.

That could come in handy. The lower the generation, the stronger the vamp. "I'm surprised that Kindred aren't out doing it all the time."

"That's why is it a crime punishable by the blood hunt."

I knew that one, it's when vamps declare open season on a particular blood-sucker. "So how do they know? You guys don't have your generation tattooed on your forehead."

He looked at me intently. "Look at my aura."

I stopped wandering around the room and did. He was calm but sad, almost a little depressed. I could see love in there though, that was good. The only funny thing about his aura was that there were thick black lines running through it. I'd seen that in vamps before, but I had no idea what it meant.

"Where did the black lines come from?" I asked. "They weren't there before."

"They show up when a Kindred has committed diablerie," he told me.

That would stick out like a sore thumb the minute someone did an aura reading. Then I remembered a particular vamp I'd seen those veins in and I looked at him apprehensively. "Do they always show up?"

"Yes."

I walked over to the love seat and sat down next to him. "Does it always lower the generation?"

"Yes, why?"

I shook my head. "They may get a surprise when they start studying Kate," I replied wryly.

He didn't understand. "Why is that?"

"Black lines," I said simply.

"Ah. Well, I'm sure they will be able to learn things from her anyway," he assured me.

"They don't often see those of fourteenth generation either."

"I suppose it's too much to hope that they'd let me kill her when it's time," I murmured softly.

"Well, if you play nice and don't piss Ford off," he said, smiling.

"You've pissed Ford off more recently than I have," I reminded him. "I've been good ever since I came to Salem. Except staking Kate."

"Like I said, if you truly want out of the contract there will be some sacrifices to be made." He sounded like he was talking to a ten-year-old who couldn't control her temper.

"I still think there's alternatives other than the whole 'drink the blood turn into a zombie' thing," I said sharply. I didn't know if I could do that, not even to get out of my contract.

"Well, if you can prove that those actions would be unneeded...."

Okay, I got the hint. No calling them vamps, no disrespecting, no staking. "I've behaved in Salem," I said defensively. "Mostly."

"You should continue to," he replied firmly.

I looked at him from the corner of my eye. "Are you saying that I shouldn't light any limos on fire with regents in them?" I wanted to see if he knew what I was talking about.

He didn't seem to. "That would be bad."

"Depends on your point of view." I remembered Luther going up in flames as a good thing.

"Exactly what I'm talking about," he pointed out.

"So I hear you had a visitor to Kate's apartment," I said to change the subject. I knew Glenn had told me to try and make me jealous, but I wasn't really worried about it.

"Yes," he replied. "You knew Christina was coming."

"Yeah. Glenn took great pleasure in telling me all about it." I slipped off my shoes and brought my knees up to my chest.

"I was wondering if he stayed," Mac murmured.

"Something about her having you wrapped around her finger," I added smiling.

"Mmm, hardly," he denied.

"Somehow I couldn't see that. Now, around my finger...." I held up my left hand, which reminded me that I still hadn't put the rings on. "Oh, speaking of fingers."

I took the necklace off and quickly put the rings back on. I wondered what he was going to say when we got back to Salem and I took them off again. Time to change the subject again. "So, what else did you do?"

"I spoke with Christina and met Jax at the airport," he told me.

"Sounds sufficiently boring," I murmured leaning my head back against the wall. "But I would much rather have been with you than arguing with the women in your family. Including Corrine."

"Oh?"

"She wasn't real happy to see me," I confessed.

"What were you arguing about besides the staking?" he asked.

"Well, I don't know if you noticed," I said dryly, "but Siofra doesn't like me. Go figure. Not that the feeling's not mutual." It was. It definitely was. "I was arguing with Corrine about me showing up there. She didn't appreciate it too much at first. She got over it."

"You weren't real happy to see me at first," he reminded me with a smile.

"I got over it." Quite well, too, I thought.

"Eventually," he conceded.

"Well, at least I got over it." Did he want me to go back to the way I'd been a week ago? I didn't think that would be healthy for either of us.

"Several stakes later," he murmured.

I grinned. "At least the stake didn't actually puncture any part of your body."

"We've had this discussion," he replied.

I laughed. "Yeah, we've had this discussion." He still thought that I couldn't stake him if I tried. And speaking of punctures. "So you probably didn't take the time to stop and feed then," I said slowly.

"I fed on the plane," he told me.

"Oh." I tried to keep the disappointment out of my voice.

"I used up all the blood bags," he added.

If I remembered right, there had been six of them in the refrigerator. "Must have been hungry," I said softly. A part of me was glad I hadn't been around to see him that hungry.

"I told you healing certain wounds take time and blood." He rubbed a hand across the goatee on his chin. "I can't just pop this out."

I reached over and ran my fingers through it. "Looks kind of bikerish. You look a little different." I liked it.

"I'm incognito," he whispered loudly, which made me laugh. "This is my home town, Eliza."

"Like you don't look wicked obvious, Mac," I told him. "You look the same as you did twenty years ago. Throw a beard on someone it doesn't change how they look that much."

"Not too many people that would remember me from twenty years ago," he said, "and those that do are too old."

"You think? I still think that—" I laughed. "Well I would have known you anywhere."

"Yeah, but you have that certain ability." He put his arm across the back of the couch and his fingers fell on my shoulder.

"Yeah, kinda hard to miss when a—" I stopped myself from saying vamp, "Kindred comes in the room."

"Have you noticed any others in town?" he asked.

Come to think of it, "No, I haven't."

He smiled. "That's because there aren't any. There's a reason my parent's house overlooks the town as it does."

That made sense. "Yeah, well at least they don't have a big sign above the town gate or something."

"That's right," he replied, chuckling, "you can't read Gaelic, can you?"

I had to laugh. "At least the whole town's not warded like Glenn's house was."

"I didn't go looking there," he murmured.

"I'm sorry I did." My hand was still a little sore from touching the doorbell.

He started playing with my hair and it was more than a little distracting. I put my chin down on my knees and concentrated on the light touch.

"So you ate on the plane?" I asked idly.

"Mostly."

"Mostly?" I opened my eyes and looked at him questioningly.

"I'm not quite full," he admitted. "I'm down a bit but no threat yet."

"Oh?" If he was down a bit it could get interesting. I found myself watching his mouth even though I knew his fangs wouldn't be down.

"I have blood with me." When I frowned, he added, "I have knowledge of the vitae infusion. We can infuse our blood into small objects for later usage."

"Gee, that'd be kinda handy, wouldn't it?" I mean, if there wasn't anyone to eat close at hand. When he agreed, I asked how small of an object could be used.

"Marble sized at the largest," he told me. "Tremere usually wear them in jewelry of some sort."

Which explained why a lot of the elders were dripping with jewelry. "So is that what you're planning on doing?"

"Not at the moment, I'm not in need of blood. Have you eaten?"

"Yeah," I told him, tucking my legs underneath me on the love seat. "Your mother's a good cook, that must be where Corrine gets it from." I leaned my head back on his arm and started watching his mouth again. "Too bad there's not a fireplace here."

I hadn't realized I'd said that aloud until Mac said, "What do you expect for Galway?"

"I don't know," I replied with a smile. "I've never been here."

"My parents have a fireplace."

It was good that he was remembering so much. "Yeah, but we're not at your parents." I didn't remember him being so thickheaded. For real now, did I have to slit my wrist and hold it in front of his face for him to know what I wanted?

He grinned. "What are you getting at, Eliza?"

I looked away and tried to appear innocent. "Nothing."

"Okay." That one word told me he knew exactly what I was trying to get at.

"It would just be nice if there is a fireplace," I drawled.

"Well, there isn't and I don't have Chimerstry," he told me with a smile.

"There's no fireplace, but there are fangs." From the corner of my eye I could see that his teeth were white but not pointed. "At least there could be."

His smile grew to a grin. "Right here on the davenport?"

"There's a bed in there," I reminded him.

"It's not that big."

"Do you need a big bed?" I asked with a smile. "We never had one before, I'm not quite sure why we'd need one now."

He wasn't listening, he'd already bent to take his boots off.

"Is that a yes?" I asked.

"Ah, I've got nothing better to do," he drawled. Before I could say anything, he looked up with an evil grin on his face.

"Well," I replied in the same tone, "I could practice throwing stakes. Use some lipstick to draw a target somewhere." I looked at his chest pointedly, no pun intended.

He sat back and pulled up his shirt to bare his chest. I leaned over and started drawing circles on his chest like a bull's eye. By the time I was done he was laughing. I made one final jab over his heart and leaned back to look at him.

"Unless we have something better to do," I drawled.

"I'm sure we could find something," he replied.

"I'm sure it's probably in the other room," I added.

He lifted the shirt over his head and I grinned. I got up and walked toward the bedroom, taking off my clothes as I went. By the time I hit the bed I was naked, and Mac wasn't very far behind me.

We laid on the bed together for a long time, holding each other and enjoying the feel of each other's skin. He was cold at first, reminding me that I needed to buy an electric blanket. A sharp pain went through my heart at that thought. I knew Mac wanted to get me out of the contract, but there was no guarantee that he could. If he couldn't, we only had six more nights together.

Eventually his skin warmed. He started kissing my neck and I arched a little to give him better access. He turned his head for a moment and when he came back I felt the sharp points of his teeth drag lightly across my sensitive skin.

I knew he was giving me a chance to pull away if I'd changed my mind, but that was the last thing I wanted. I turned my head, baring my neck to him, silently inviting him to taste me.

He gently kissed my skin then very slowly opened his mouth until he was poised for the bite. I felt his teeth ease into my flesh and my body shivered in response. The feelings washing over me were so intense that I wanted to cry. I felt like I was melting into him, as if he were drawing my life inside of him.

I tangled my hand in his hair and held him against me. I could feel the blood slowly leaving my body as he took his time drinking. My heart was pounding and I felt like I couldn't get enough air into my lungs.

It's so very hard to describe the way he made me feel, even harder to adjust to sensations that washed over me. When he bit me I couldn't even remember what it was like to feel pain from a Kindred's feeding. I knew he loved me and that love washed over me like a warm blanket in the dead of winter.

I moaned in protest when he withdrew his fangs and licked the wounds closed. He laughed low in his throat and the sound was almost more seductive than his bite had been. I pulled his face up to mine and kissed him. Once again I could taste my blood on his lips.

It was the most natural thing in the world to go from the bite to making love. I'd thought we'd reached heaven the last time we'd been together, but he took me places I didn't know existed. It was an earth shattering experience.

A long time later he went into the sitting room while I got up to take a shower. I was very tired, but it was a good tired. Mac had given me peace and love, and now I was happier than I'd been in a long time. Being here with Mac gave me more than I could have ever expected from life. Corrine was safe with a family that loved her and would protect her if anything happened to me, and I was with the man I loved. What more could I ask for?

For real now, getting out of the contract would be a good thing, but not if I had to go all Renfield to do it. I mean it was a little too much to ask, wasn't it? I'd seen the way people get on Kindred blood once they taste it. And if it had been a blood bond that had made Linda crazy over Kate, I didn't want any part of it.

Still, it would be nice not to have to live a lie every minute of every day, to not have to kill things just because some Society bigwig said I had to. And to be with Mac again every night for more than just two weeks would be... I didn't even know what it would be. Too good to be true, that's what it would be.

He had a point though; Corrine had other people who could take over protecting her now. It was time for me to step back and let her make her own way in life. I sure as hell didn't want her to resent me for trying to stay in control of her future. She was a big girl now, she had to stand or fall on her own.

But to be so dependent on someone else like Linda had been to Kate, I didn't like that idea. And who would they want me ghouled to? Probably someone who they thought would do a good job of controlling me, maybe someone like Alden, or Zora. I'd be deeply fantasizing if I thought they'd pick Mac to handle it.

Would it make a difference if they did? I mean, I loved him anyway. He did have a way of making me listen to him, even when I thought I was right. Would a blood bond change the way I felt for him? Make me need him even more? That was a funny thought. As if I didn't need him enough now. It was going to kill me to give him up again.

I pushed those thoughts away and dried myself off. I didn't have anything to sleep in so I put on one of Mac's tee shirts and went looking for him. He was on the love seat with a handful of pictures on his lap.

"What're you doing?" I asked softly, brushing my damp hair away from my face.

"Looking at pictures," he replied as he held one out toward me

"Are those from the grimoire?" I took the picture and when I looked at it I blinked in surprise. I'd seen this picture before, I'd been in the room when it was taken standing next to Jane.

Mac's words brought me back to the present. "Can you tell me who the man in the background is?"

"Where in the hell did you get this?" I demanded.

"Dougal's grimoire."

Dougal. It figures that he would have taken other things from the apartment besides my lover. I looked back at the picture. Mac was standing in a doorway of the brownstone with two other men that had lived there. "Okay, that's Walter," I said, pointing to the one in the foreground, "and that's um, Clay, Clay Dolby." Both of them had died in the raids.

Mac made an acknowledging murmur but didn't say anything.

"He lived at the brownstone with you guys," I told him. "So did Walter."

"Was he a mage as well?"

Apparently he still wasn't remembering everything. "Yeah, you all were." I looked at the remaining pictures on his lap. "What's the rest of them?"

He handed them to me. Two were of women and one of those was pretty old. One was of an oriental guy standing near a tree and it was also fairly old. The only photo in color was of two couples dressed for an evening out. When I got to that picture, Mac said, "The dark haired girl is Christina."

That caught my interest. "Oh? Who's the guys with her?"

"I have no idea."

"So why would Dougal have all these people in his grimoire?" It didn't make sense to me.

"Well, the one of me is—"

"Probably taken from our apartment," I interrupted.

"Yes. I believe the one of the Asian gentleman is Lon, Dougal's oldest child," he told me. That would be the one Dougal had referred to in his letters to Gomi. "I'm not sure who the two ladies are."

"Pretty old pictures." I didn't know much about photography, but one of those looked like it was taken near the turn of the century.

"Yes," he agreed dryly. "Dougal was a pretty old guy."

"Yeah." Stupid of me to forget that Kindred lived a long damn time. I sat down next to Mac and when he put his arm around me I snuggled into his side. "So you're just sitting out here looking at pictures?"

"I had a few phone calls to make," he admitted.

I looked up at him questioningly. "Oh yeah?"

"Yes," he murmured. "I already made them."

So much for listening in. "What time is it?"

He glanced at his watch. "Quarter to five."

I covered my mouth to hide a yawn. "I feel like I've been up for... all day." You know, there was a reason I felt like that. "Wait, I have been."

"Why don't you turn in?" he said softly. "You have to meet Corrine in a few hours."

"Yeah, she's supposed to be bringing my nightgowns," I said dryly.

"Amongst other things."

I smiled. "Remember the whole 'I don't have anything to wear' deal that you stressed out over?"

"I wasn't stressing," he denied. "You may want to wait for her downstairs."

"Probably a good idea." She really didn't need to see him lying dead on the bed. Literally.

"The caretaker was left with instructions not to disturb me during the day," he explained.

"Also a good idea." The maid would have freaked out when she came in and saw the corpse on the bed. All right, I knew I was too tired when I started thinking like that. I mean, I'd just slept with the corpse, hadn't I? "What are you going to do?"

"Stay up, study for a little bit."

I stifled another yawn. "I guess since I'm really tired, I'll just get a couple of hours sleep."

"Are you just going to get your possessions tomorrow or do you feel like doing a bit of shopping?" he asked.

"I don't know, why?"

"Well, go to the outdoors store and get Corrine a gun so we can start teaching her how to shoot."

"Yeah." Somehow I didn't think it was going to be that easy for a couple of reasons. "First of all, I'm not an Irish citizen, can I buy a gun?"

"Yes."

My eyebrows shot up. "They're just going to let me buy one? No waiting list, no—"

"This is Ireland," he reminded me. "As long as you're not going to buy anything real big, bad and powerful, we are far enough away from the Belfast boys and the IRA."

"I thought they didn't have guns in Britain." Didn't they always show the Bobbies unarmed in movies?

He looked at me with irritation in his eyes. "Ireland is not part of Britain."

Like I knew that. "I'll see what I can do, but I don't know about teaching her to shoot." Corrine had never approved of guns.

"You don't have to teach her," he told me. "Just buy it and I'll teach her."

That sounded good. "Fair enough."

"Something small," he murmured. "Smaller than ours."

"Don't you have something in your bag?"

"Revolvers, but they're a bit bulky," he replied. "Something that will fit easily into her purse, or school bag, or glove box."

"Or the small of her back," I added.

"I'm thinking concealability," he told me.

"The small of your back is concealable if you're wearing a jacket," I reminded him. Where did he think I kept my stakes?

"I don't think I've ever seen Corrine wear a jacket," he murmured.

"I have." That had been a stupid thing to say, I'd known her all her life, of course I'd seen her wear a jacket. "Anything else you want me to pick up while I'm out?"

"No, I believe that will be all."

"Okay, well, I guess I'll go lay down then." I gave him a lingering hug and a quick kiss. Anything more would have made me try and get him to come back to bed with me and not to sleep.

When I got up and walked into the bedroom he followed me. He grabbed a few books from his things and to my surprise, a knife.

I couldn't not ask. "What do you need a knife and books for?"

"I told you I'm going to be practicing," he said patiently, looking a little surprised I'd asked.

"I don't even want to know," I told him firmly. "Goodnight."

As he told me goodnight and closed the door I yawned and climbed into the bed, curling up on my side. When I realized that I hadn't grabbed one of my stakes to sleep with, I didn't bother to get up. I hadn't needed one earlier, and Mac said himself that his family kept Kindred out of town. It wasn't like one was going to come calling in the middle of the day, was it? And I knew Mac would take care of it if one came before dawn.

Weariness swept through me and I let it carry me off to sleep. Hours later I woke to the phone ringing. I jerked awake, my hand going under the pillow before I remembered there wasn't a stake there. I cursed softly and eased out of bed as quickly as I could, grabbing for the phone and answering it quickly, hoping it wouldn't disturb Mac.

"Hello?"

It was Corrine. "Eliza, did I wake you?"

"Yeah," I said softly, rubbing my eyes. "It's okay. What time is it?"

"A little after ten. Do you want me to let you sleep a while before I bring your stuff down?"

I'd only been sleeping for five hours and I knew I needed more. Damn, I was getting soft. "Do you mind?" I asked.

"Not at all," she told me. "Call me when you get up."

"I will."

We said our good-byes and I hung up the phone. I put it back on the bedside table and sat down on the edge of the bed. The room was mostly dark but I could see Mac lying unmoving

on the bed. It was still really strange for me to see him that way and know that when the sun went down he'd get up and move around. I laid down next to him and just watched him for a long time, thinking.

I already knew what price I would pay to keep Corrine safe, I've been doing it for years. The question that haunted me now was what price would I pay to be with Mac and still keep her safe? How could I walk away from him knowing how good we were together? Was there a way we could still see each other if I kept working for the Society?

For the life of me I just didn't see how that could happen. As it was Jared had heard rumors of me and Kate, and I knew Mac and I would have to see each other more often than I'd ever wanted to see Kate. How long before those rumors got back to someone at St. Stephen's? How long before someone followed me to the apartment and found Mac there? How many more friends would I have to kill before someone caught on?

Still, it frightened me to think about being like Linda even though Mac seemed to think being a ghoul wasn't a big deal. Was it? I thought about the ghouls I knew; none of them really acted like Linda but then I wasn't ever with them for very long either. Jax didn't seem like he was jonesing for his master too badly.

Was Linda just an example of the worst that could happen to a ghoul? Or maybe it was Kate who was to blame for the way Linda had been. Then again, maybe my memories of her were colored from the events of my childhood, maybe she really hadn't been that bad.

No, she really had been that bad.

But the bite was different with Mac, maybe the blood bond would be too. After all, if his love for me made his feeding pleasurable, maybe I wouldn't be like Linda from his blood. It was all so confusing and there was no way to tell what would happen except to just do it.

I fell asleep wondering if I could live with myself if I turned into Linda.

DAUGHTER

ALL FIVE HORIZONS REVOLVED AROUND HER SOUL
AS THE EARTH TO THE SUN
BLACK — PEARL JAM

I woke up a few hours later feeling much better. I showered quickly and dressed in the same clothes I'd worn the night before. Not that I had much choice in the matter, I had nothing else with me and Mac's things were way too big.

After a quick call to Corrine, I found some money and a note on the table that Mac had left for me. It detailed exactly what kind of gun to buy for Corrine and asked me to buy a bottle of wine for tonight.

Corrine pulled up just as I was leaving the building. We decided to park the car and walk through Galway. We found a street vendor and got something to eat as we walked and talked.

"So what's the deal with your... mom?" she asked softly when we were done eating.

"Kate," I corrected her firmly.

"Kate," she repeated. "Is she still on the loose or what?"

"Oh, no," I told her.

"Cause you know I kinda need to get back to school," she reminded me. "As soon as I can."

I'd almost forgotten about that. "Well, you should be all right with that because the clan has her." I didn't think they'd be letting her go any time soon.

"So it's okay for me to go home then?"

"Sure," I said with a smile. "Whenever you want."

She looked relieved. "Okay."

I turned and looked at a pretty necklace in a window display. "Just as soon as you let Mac teach you how to shoot a gun," I added.

She didn't like that. "I do not need to know how to shoot a gun. There are other things that Jared is teaching me—"

"But Mac would like you to know," I said earnestly. "Can't you just do this for him?"

She rolled her eyes. "I'll think about it."

I didn't want to push too hard, so I let that go. "Lets go get the gun and that way if you decide to let him, it will be there."

"And you're going to hold on to it, right?" she said warningly.

"Sure." I'd hold onto it long enough for Mac to wake up, and he could give it to her.

We found the gun Mac had wanted me to buy along with the case, holster, extra clip and ammo he had added to the list. Then we found the bottle of wine he'd asked for before we went on to other serious shopping. Corrine got it in her head that I needed a makeover and I was so glad to be able to spend time with her like this that I didn't argue.

"I had an interesting conversation with grandfather last night," she told me as we waited for the manicurist to finish up a client.

"Oh, really?" I tried not to sound too interested. "What about?"

"The family," she said vaguely.

"Anything interesting, anything I should know?" For example, it'd be nice to know if anyone planned on beheading Mac. Not that I thought they would, mind you, but it would be good to know if they did.

"He's very anxious to spend time with Cormac again," she replied.

"Which is to be expected." I mean, after twenty years and losing their last remaining son, I'm sure they'd like to spend time with him. I would. Hell, I did and he wasn't even my son.

"He asked me a little bit about you," she said, watching me from the corner of her eye. "They don't know you so he asked me what kind of a person you are."

That could be good or bad. "And you told him what?"

"I told him the truth." She seemed surprised I'd asked. "What, do you want me to lie?"

I smiled wryly. "It depends on what truth you told him." There were some things Mac's family didn't need to know.

"I told him that you were loyal, and that you'd give your shirt off your back if somebody needed it," she said, as if those were obvious things. "You know, you care about those that you care about."

"True enough," I admitted. That part of it was, anyway. I guess it didn't occur to Corrine that she was the only one I'd give the shirt of my back for.

She sighed. "Can't you just give everybody a chance? Don't freak out like you like to do."

"I do not freak out," I denied hotly. I don't. Not often, anyway.

"Oh, no," she drawled. "You're not doing that at all right now."

"I do not freak out. Where do you get that I freak out?" When she just looked at me, I added, "Don't give me that look, Corrine Mackenzie."

"All right, little Miss Attitude," she said dryly, then under her breath, "You just hate people on sight."

Enough was enough. "I have not met a person that I've hated on site." Vamps on the other hand were a different story. "I haven't, not a person. I've been nice to his family." As nice as I could be given the circumstances. I'd been nice to his parents.

"You and Siofra get along just really well," she said sarcastically. When I didn't answer her, she looked into the window of the store we were sitting in front of. "Enough said. You know, look at this cute little hat."

"Very cute, yeah," I grudgingly admitted.

"So you are going to try right?" she asked almost pleadingly. "When you guys come out to the farm tonight? You are coming out to the farm, aren't you?"

I nodded. "Mac did promise."

"Right." She seemed relieved.

Did she think I'd let Mac go out there alone? And what exactly did she think I was planning on doing to Siofra? "Well, I won't stake her." As pleasant as that sounded, I wouldn't.

She gave me a strange look. "I don't think it would do you any good anyhow."

"You'd be surprised at what stakes take care of," I told her before I thought. Great, now she was going to think I was some kind of crazed murderer. I tried to smile. "I'll be nice."

Around five thirty we went back to the room to wait for Mac to get up. It didn't bother me to be in the sitting room while he slept, but I think it bothered her. She seemed increasingly nervous as the sun went down.

She glanced uncertainly at the door to the bedroom a few minutes after sundown. "So shouldn't Mac be getting up soon?"

I could feel him moving around in there, but I wasn't going to tell her that. She didn't know I could feel vampires. "He probably is up."

She looked at the door again. "Do you want me to meet you guys downstairs?"

"He has the whole bedroom to get ready in," I reminded her. Did she think he was going to come out here half dressed? He had to hear us out here.

"Well I didn't know if you wanted to talk to him privately," she said hesitantly, "tell him anything."

"Your mind is somewhere that I didn't take it," I murmured.

She gave me a too innocent look. "Why, whatever are you talking about?"

I shook my head and smiled. "If you're uncomfortable up here, you can wait downstairs. Otherwise, sit here and wait."

"I'm not uncomfortable," she denied. "You're the one sitting there jittering all around, looking at the door every three seconds."

"I do not jitter," I said firmly. And I hadn't looked at my watch in at least thirty seconds.

"Okay, your leg is bobbing up and down right there," she pointed out, "that's not jittering, no not at all."

I forced myself to stop moving. "My leg's not jittering."

She grinned. "Oh, you do have some control, I'm glad to see that."

That wasn't funny. "You know I've been meaning to talk to you about this word, Corrine," I said dryly. "It's 'tact'."

"Now that would be the last word I thought you would know the definition to," she told me laughingly.

"Well I think that you've inherited your—Mac's tact and—"

"Actually she sounds more like you at the moment," he told me, standing in the doorway to the bedroom.

She shot him that same innocent look she'd given me a few minutes ago, but I don't think he bought it any more than I had. "Mac, good evening," she said warmly, standing up and walking over to him for a kiss and a hug. "Did you... sleep well?"

He glanced at me, an amused look in his eyes. "Like the dead," we said together.

She blushed a little. "That was a really stupid question."

"Yes it was," he agreed. "Did you have an eventful day today?"

"Yeah we did," she told him, grateful for the change of subject. "Eliza and I spent the day together, shopping."

"Hmm, good." He looked over at me. "Did you pick up everything I asked you to?"

"Of course."

"Thank you," he said as I stood up and walked over for my own hug and kiss.

Corrine watched us and I could see from the corner of my eye that she was grinning. She was liking this way too much. How was she going to understand if we couldn't get the contract burned and had to stop seeing each other?

I pushed the thought from my mind. "Good evening," I told Mac as I stepped to the side leaving my arm around his waist.

"Good morning," he replied, smiling down at me and keeping me close to his side. I had missed him entirely too much while I was out with Corrine. This wasn't good.

"So are you ready?" Corrine interrupted.

"Yes," he told her.

Abruptly I noticed that something was different about the feel of his jacket; he wasn't wearing his figure eight. I hadn't seen him without it and it kind of surprised me. He did have the same gun at the small of his back that he'd worn the night before, though.

"Shall we?" he asked the both of us.

Corrine answered. "We shall."

As she moved toward the door, he said, "Would you mind taking the wine, Corrine? Assuming you drove."

"Sure," she replied, looking a little confused.

"It's a little more steady with the bike," he explained.

"Are you planning on ditching the bike?" I asked.

"No, but are you going to hold on to me or the bottle of wine?"

"There are the saddle bags," I reminded him.

"They're full."

"You know we can all go together," Corrine suggested softly.

"I'll drive, thank you," he replied firmly.

Her eyebrows shot up. "Are you thinking you need a fast route out?"

"No. I like to drive if you don't mind, dear," he added to ease his inflexible refusal.

"No, I don't mind at all." But you could tell she did.

Mac sighed. "Just like her mother," he murmured as he picked up the bag that held the gun. As we walked downstairs, he looked inside before stuffing the bag in his pocket.

REUNION

YOU'LL REMEMBER ME WHEN THE WEST WIND MOVES AMONG THE FIELDS OF
BARLEY
YOU CAN TELL THE SUN IN HIS JEALOUS SKY THAT WE WALKED IN FIELDS OF GOLD
FIELDS OF GOLD – STING

We followed Corrine out to the farmhouse where the porch light was on, waiting for us. When I got off the bike I took off the helmet and shook out my hair, feeling Mac's eyes on me every second.

As I sat the helmet on the seat, he drawled, "I see Corrine's been dressing you."

I flushed at the approval in his voice. "Well, you know she's just so stubborn it's hard to refuse her." Not that I hadn't wanted to look nice for my lover.

"Just like her mother," he said with a smile.

"She's persuasive," I admitted, "or persistent, or whatever that word is. She's also waiting for us." Corrine had walked ahead and was standing at the bottom of the porch steps.

"We have all night," he replied as we walked toward her.

"Some people sleep at night," I reminded him.

"It's six-thirty," he told me. "And I'm sure they heard us pull up."

"I'm sure they did, I'm surprised they're not at the—" At that moment, Alaster opened the door and looked out at us.

"Hello, Corrine," he said softly to her.

She came forward and kissed his cheek. "Hello, Grandfather."

"Did you have a pleasant day?"

"Yes, I did," she replied. "Thank you for letting me use the car."

"She's got him wrapped around her little finger already, doesn't she?" he leaned down to whisper in my ear.

"Noticed that, did you?" I asked softly, smiling. "Just wait, it'll be your turn next."

Alaster looked past Corrine at us as we climbed the steps and our daughter moved to one side. "Macalaster."

"Good evening, Da," Mac greeted him.

He smiled. "I won't ask you how you slept."

Mac chuckled as they shook hands.

"Eliza," Alaster said pleasantly to me.

I knew Mac wouldn't like it if I called him 'Mr. Brennan' so I settled for a simple, "Sir." Now wasn't the time for an argument.

"Did you have a good day as well?" Alaster asked.

"Yes, thank you."

"I'm glad you enjoyed the village," he said, including Corrine in the statement and stepping back to let us inside.

"Ladies first," Mac murmured as Corrine walked ahead of us.

"Are you trying to put it off?" I whispered as I went forward.

"No," he said almost sounding offended. "Ladies first."

"Ah, Grandmother," Corrine murmured, walking forward and hugging the older woman.

"Good evening," Noinen replied, returning Corrine's hug but looking over her shoulder at Mac.

"Good evening," I told her.

"Good evening," she repeated, staring at Mac almost as if she couldn't believe he was standing in her house again.

Mac let go of my hand and took a step toward her. "Hello Ma."

She came closer, still looking as if she thought he'd fade away any moment. She reached up to touch his face and he leaned into her caress. When she assured herself he was real, she threw her arms around him and hugged him tight.

Mac held her while she cried softly until she got a hold of herself again. She pulled away and ran her hands down his face, shoulders and chest, almost as if she was checking to see if he was hurt. I remembered doing the same thing to Corrine on many occasions when she was much younger.

Finally she stepped away and they smiled at each other as Alaster took her hand and gave her a handkerchief to dry her eyes.

"How have you been?" Mac asked her.

"Better now that you're home with us," she told him.

"For a bit," he said gently.

"Come on in," Alaster said after a moment. "Let's go into the great room and have a seat."

"Let me take your coat," Noinen added.

Mac took off his jacket and hung it on the rack that stood near the door. When he turned for mine, I didn't want to give it up.

"That's okay," I told him. I didn't want to give up my weapons and I didn't want his family to know how little I trusted them. Most of them, anyway.

"Elizabeth," he said in a low warning voice.

I glanced at his parents. "If I take the jacket off," I whispered, "then I have to remove the stakes at my back."

"I'm the only vampire here," he reminded me just as quietly.

I could have reminded him that a stake to the heart can kill other things just as easily as a knife, but I didn't want to say it out loud. After a long moment I reluctantly pulled the stakes from my back and shoved them into a pocket of the leather jacket and handed him the coat. He hung it up and we followed his parents and Corrine into the great room.

Siofra and Glenn stood up when we entered the room, watching Mac and I warily. What did they think we'd do, kill his parents at the door? Corrine walked over and greeted them warmly with a hug. They returned her greeting while still keeping an eye on us.

"Hello, Glen, Siofra," Mac said when Corrine returned to Alaster's side.

Glenn nodded. "Mac, Eliza."

Siofra walked across the room and gave Mac a hug.

"Evening Sprite," he murmured softly.

"How are you feeling tonight?" she asked, looking down at his leg.

He hadn't been limping, but she must have remembered his injury. "Better."

"Good." She glanced at me and her face went cold. "Eliza."

I wanted to respond just as coldly, but Mac squeezed my hand and I could see Corrine looking at me encouragingly. I made myself reply a lot warmer than I wanted to. "Good evening Siofra."

I sat down on the couch while Mac took the wine over to the sidebar where Alaster helped him pour it into wineglasses. Once the wine had been passed around, Mac sat down next to me and I listened as the group small talked.

"You bought some new clothes, I see," Siofra murmured with a pointed look at my shirt.

She hadn't liked what I'd worn in Nashville and she obviously didn't like what I was wearing now. Mac and Corrine were dreaming if they thought she would ever warm up to me, but I'd play their game as long as they wanted me to. I opened my mouth to say something sickly sweet, but Corrine spoke first.

"Oh no," she said defensively while not trying to sound defensive. "Actually she bought that before they traveled to Europe."

Siofra gave a weak smile. "Well, it's a nice shirt."

I smiled past my irritation. "Thank you."

"Oh, my gosh," Corrine said suddenly. "I forgot that bag in the car, Eliza."

"You want me to get it for you?" I offered. Anything to get out of the house for even a minute would be good.

"No, I'll go get it," she told me. "Relax, I'll be right back." She sat her glass on the low table and excused herself.

"Where are you living now?" Noinen asked Mac after Corrine had gone.

"I've been living in Los Angeles for the last five years or so," he told her. "I'm planning on moving to Salem."

"Washington?"

"Massachusetts."

His mother looked at him expectantly and when he didn't continue she asked, "Is there something special in Salem?"

"A few things," he told her. He squeezed my hand and I couldn't stop myself from blushing.

I looked down wondering just how special he'd find Salem if we couldn't 'renegotiate' the contract with Ford. Still, he'd be close to Corrine wouldn't he? How hard would he fight his clan to be with me? How hard would he fight me if I couldn't bring myself to become a puppy?

"Isn't that where Corrine is living now?" Alaster asked.

"Oh, yes," Noinen replied.

"Going to school in Boston for psychology I believe," he added.

"So where is the rest of the party?" Mac asked, looking at Glenn.

Siofra answered. "Well, they thought they'd give us a little bit of time before they came back, although Cara is supposed to be here."

"Yes, I'm looking forward to seeing her," Mac said.

Her hesitation was slight, but it was there. "She's looking forward to seeing you too."

"So I hear," he murmured with a smile.

"Where did you live before Los Angeles?" Noinen asked. She still had years of news to go through with him and I didn't think she'd be discouraged from learning all about Mac's life, especially when no one else would tell her anything about it.

"We moved around quite a bit," he told her, "stayed at a lot of the chantries in whatever city we were visiting. We spent a little bit of time in Salem, Detroit, Chicago, San Francisco." At that point he realized he was rambling. "And several other places."

"We," she said thoughtfully. "That would be you and...?" She looked at her husband.

"Dougal," he supplied, his voice carefully empty of emotion.

"Yes," Mac acknowledged.

An awkward silence filled the room and I'm sure all of them were wondering how to change the subject. Discussing the fiend who'd changed Mac probably wasn't a good topic for pre-dinner conversation given that Mac would have been the only one with anything good to say about him.

Luckily Corrine came back in right then and sat down on the arm of the couch next to her grandfather. Mac watched her and smiled to himself.

"I picked up something for you grandmother while Eliza and I were shopping today," she said over Alaster to Noinen.

"That was thoughtful of you," she replied, "but you know you didn't have to."

"But I wanted to." She pulled the clock out of the bag and handed it to her grandmother.

"Oh, Corrine," Noinen said with an awestruck tone to her voice, "where did you find this?" She smiled. "At one of the antique stores downtown."

"Thank you," her grandmother told her. It was obvious that she really liked the clock. Corrine had told me earlier that Noinen had been looking for a clock of that type to replace the one Alaster had been unable to fix.

Corrine pulled the large box of expensive chocolates out of the bag and handed it to Alaster, who took it with a smile.

"Thank you," he said as he opened the box. He took one and passed it around the room. When everyone had taken one, he ate one more and sat the box aside. "It's good to see that you had a good day in Galway," he told Corrine. "Thank you for the chocolates."

"You're welcome," she replied. "I have a few holidays to make up for."

Just at that moment the front door opened and Cara walked in. When Alaster saw who had come in, he stood up, as did Mac.

"Cara, we were worried about you," Alaster said as she came into the great room.

"Oh, I ran into a bit of a delay," she told him, "but I'm here." She walked closer and looked over Alaster's shoulder at Mac. She looked like she wasn't sure if she should hug him or stake him. I stood up to make sure she knew I wouldn't allow the staking. Her eyes slid past Mac at my movement and I knew she'd gotten the warning when she gave a little smile.

"Good evening, Cara," Mac said softly.

"Macalaster," she replied, trying to smile as she walked into the room. "It's been a long time."

"Yes."

"Hello, Cara," Corrine said pleasantly.

"Hi Corrine," she replied, kissing her on the cheek.

Mac stepped forward and Cara looked at him for a long moment. She let him hug her, but she wasn't overly warm about it. It made me wish I'd told her she had to be nice to him too.

When he moved back, he left his hands on her shoulders for a moment. "I was sorry to hear about Angus," he said softly, his voice wistful. "I would have liked to have seen him again."

Pain flashed through her eyes before she looked down. It was wicked obvious that she was still hurting from her husband's death. "I know he would have liked to see you again, Mac." There was an honesty to her voice that there hadn't been before.

Mac let her go and she went to sit next to Noinen. She greeted Glenn and Siofra, although she seemed a little cool to Glenn. For that matter, Mac's parents seemed cool toward him too. They must have still been pissed about him not sharing what he knew about Mac.

I watched everyone talking, staying out of the conversation as much as possible. I've never been one for small talk, especially with people who live normal lives. For real now, what do we have in common? Other than killing vamps, I mean. I didn't think Mac would like it if I started talking shop with Glenn and Siofra.

There was a lot of affection between members of Mac's family. Everyone seemed to have accepted Corrine into the family, although Cara was a little more reserved about it. His parents treated the in-laws as part of the family and I have to say that they included me in that too.

I was glad that Noinen and Alaster were treating Mac as if he'd never been gone, even though I caught Noinen tearing up a few times when she looked at him. I didn't think she was crying because he was a vampire, I think she was just happy to have him home again.

Corrine seemed to be getting along well with everyone, Alaster more than the rest of them. Then again, she'd always gotten along more with Gene than Martina, I think that she just knows how to deal with men more than women.

The family filled Mac in on family matters, births, weddings, deaths, and the like. Mac seemed to recognize the people they are talking about and was able to ask a few pertinent questions. After a while, Corrine, Siofra and Noinen went into kitchen to finish dinner. Jared and Bobby came in around seven thirty, just in time to eat.

When we sat down at the table, I was glad Corrine had insisted I get a makeover. It wasn't that everyone was dressed fancy or anything, but they were dressed well. Even Bobby was wearing an all black outfit that was the most formal I'd ever seen him in.

There was an awkward moment when I passed Mac one of the dishes, but he ignored it as he spooned a large helping onto his plate. After he handed the dish to Alaster, he licked at his thumb where some of the food had gotten at his skin. Everyone watched and although he must have felt like a bug in a jar, he sure didn't show it.

"Everything smells delicious, Ma," he said with a boyish grin.

After that the family seemed to accept that Mac could eat just like the rest of us and the meal went well. Jared seemed a little uncomfortable, almost like he hadn't spent a lot of time with the family. Bobby was more polite than he'd been, and I couldn't help but wonder why.

Cara filled Mac in on changes in the village, friends they'd once had in common. Then she asked about Stephen.

"The last time I saw him a week and a half ago," Mac replied, "he was going to cleanse someone in Salem. He was already talked about going to find someone in Mississippi."

"When he set out to find you we really didn't think he would," she told him. "How did he find you?"

Mac smiled. "He walked into a bar I was in. Apparently he had run into another of my kind in San Francisco and they were sort of... kindred spirits."

That comment made me cough and I covered my mouth with my napkin to hide it.

"Someone put him in contact with the right people," he continued. "I was in Las Vegas."

"I thought you said you were living in LA," Noinen said softly.

"I was," he replied. "We had traveled to Las Vegas for a mission, I had to help out with something. A rogue Kindred of another clan."

"So how did you find Eliza?" his mother asked.

"I walked up to her in a bar she was working at," he told her.

Cara grinned. "Spending a lot of time in bars are you Mac?"

"No," he said with an answering grin. "I had originally been sent quite against my will to an alternate reality where I met the Eliza of that reality. She jogged my memory a bit and of course Stephen had the picture. Apparently he found her first—"

"In this bar," Cara interrupted.

"Yes."

"He's spending entirely too much time in bars," she murmured.

"He was working," Mac replied. "Not at the bar of course. He was drinking milk. When I regained our reality, he led me to her."

"That's quite interesting," Alaster said thoughtfully.

"Yes," Mac agreed.

Cara turned to Corrine. "So how do you know Eliza?"

"I've always known Eliza," she said simply. "My mom and dad own a farm in Maine and after I was born, Eliza lived nearby and worked on the farm."

When she looked at me, I smiled at her fondly. I had enjoyed working on the farm, it had been the first time I'd really spent that much time with animals and nature. Of course I'd loved being able to spend so much time with Corrine when she was little.

"I grew up with her, we were very close," Corrine continued. "I always told her things. I've always known her, she's always been a part of my life."

That seemed to impress the family and I didn't understand why. I mean, she was my daughter, after all. Shouldn't I want to spend time with her? Be there when she needed me? Protect her from the monsters that stalked the night?

When dinner was over, Corrine and I helped Noinen with the clean up while the rest of them went out to the patio behind the house. Corrine asked her grandmother about one of the dishes we'd eaten, and Noinen explained how to make it.

"I'll have to make that when I get home," Corrine said. "I really need to go soon, I've been gone from my classes for almost a week and I don't want to fall behind, even though I've really been enjoying myself here. Maybe I could come back on my next break."

"You would be more than welcome, Corrine," Noinen assured her. "When did you plan on going back home?"

Corrine looked at me. "Well, probably soon. This weekend. There's a friend I can talk to about one class, but I need time to find out what I missed in the other ones."

I nodded. "Glenn could probably see you back. Or Jared for that matter." I kept forgetting that Jared had learned new tricks since I'd known him in Baltimore.

"That's one little trick I need to learn," Corrine murmured.

When we rejoined the others, we passed an hour in pleasant conversation. Because everyone was focusing on Mac, it was easy for me to avoid answering questions I didn't want to. Around ten thirty it was obvious that Alaster and Noinen were getting tired and Mac knew it.

"I'd like to walk up to the point again," he told his father. "Is it okay if we leave the bike here and return for it a little later?"

"Of course it is, son," he assured him.

"Is the range out on the east acre?" Mac asked.

"Yes."

He turned to Corrine, but her attention was elsewhere. "Corrine."

She turned from her conversation with Cara. "Yeah?"

"Tomorrow evening?"

She nodded. "That's the next evening, yeah."

"We teach you to shoot," he said firmly. "Don't argue with me," he added warningly when she would have protested.

I covered my mouth to hide the smile on my face. It was good to see Mac come up against his own brand of stubbornness from someone else. Corrine was more than a match for him in that arena.

She gave him her patented 'Oh you think so' look. "We'll see."

Mac didn't let it get to him. He turned to his father. "Tomorrow night."

"If you'd like we could start in on her early in the day," Alaster offered.

"There is no need for me to learn," Corrine told them.

They turned as one to face her. "Corrine Mackenzie," they both scolded.

She looked at Alaster imploringly, but he wasn't budging. It was the first time I'd seen just where Mac got his stubbornness.

"It's best to be knowing how to protect yourself," he told her firmly. "Sometimes a knife doesn't get it done."

"I thought that's what Jared's lessons were supposed to be for," she replied.

"Sometimes that's not enough either," Mac told her. He was right, of course. If magic had been enough, we wouldn't be where we were today, would we? Mac would never have been embraced and I might have had that house with the white picket fence.

"Look," she said, trying to dismiss the subject, "I have a knife that Eliza taught me how to use and I can do it pretty well."

Mac's whole family looked questioningly at me but I tried to ignore it. What was I supposed to do, pull out a knife and show them how good I was with it? Would that make them happy? I think not.

"What do you do when someone's standing out of knife range?" Mac demanded.

I barely stopped myself from commenting but to me it was simple; if you're out of knife range, you throw the knife.

"Do you have it on you?"

"Yep." She looked defiant, and I wasn't sure if I believed she really did.

"Draw it," he demanded, standing up. I sighed because I knew what he was planning to do. I just hoped it drove his point home without upsetting her.

Corrine looked really confused, but she got to her feet and reached behind her back. Before she got very far, Mac had his gun drawn and pointed at her head. His index finger lay along side the barrel, not anywhere near the trigger.

"Bang."

I glanced around the room to see everyone's reactions, but it wasn't as bad as I thought it would be. Noinen seemed taken aback, Bobby and Cara didn't seem too happy, but the rest of them didn't look too surprised. In fact, Alaster almost looked like he'd expected it.

Corrine on the other hand seemed stunned. "Like I could pull a gun that fast anyhow," she said defensively.

"Your mother can do it," Mac said grimly.

I winced at the expression on her face. It was like the wind was taken from her sails and she looked away quickly. Instantly I knew what the problem was; I wanted to tell Mac that Corrine's mother was in Maine, that I was still Eliza to her and knowing that I'd given birth to her hadn't changed that in her heart.

"I don't know about drawing a gun that fast," I murmured, "but I can draw a knife a hell of a lot faster."

"That's what I was talking about," Mac agreed, letting the gun drop to his side.

"Or a stake," I added under my breath.

"Okay," Corrine said tonelessly. "Whatever."

Mac and I were going to have a conversation about this. He shouldn't be pushing her this way. Just because he welcomed the news that he had a daughter didn't mean she welcomed the news that we were her parents. That's not to say that I thought she didn't like the idea, it's just that it would take some getting used to for her.

"Sometimes your magic is not enough," he said almost harshly. He put the gun away and held his hand out to me. "Shall we?"

"Yeah." I took his hand and let him pull me to my feet.

Bobby shook Mac's hand, still seeming a little wary about having a vampire this close to him without killing it, but he said goodnight anyway.

Mac hugged his sister and shook Glenn's hand. Siofra was being marginally nicer to me and I wondered exactly what Mac had said to her in order to bring that little miracle about. Cara hugged Mac and kissed his cheek.

"It's good to see you again, Mac," she told him. I was glad to see that she actually meant it.

Mac smiled. "It's good to be seen."

Noinen gave her son another hug, probably the tenth or so of the evening. I'd lost count hours ago of the number of times she'd touched him in some way or another.

He shook hands with his father. "I've got the gun for Corrine in my coat, if you'd...."

Alaster nodded. "I'll walk you to the door."

Corrine looked a little reserved, but she let Mac hug her and kiss her cheek.

"It's for your own good, dear," he told her, his voice soft as he touched the side of her face.

"Yeah, I know," she said reluctantly. "I know."

"That delivery boy?" he added with a meaningful look. "He was one of Prudence's...."

"Puppies," I supplied.

"Ghoul," he corrected.

I blinked at the hard tone of his voice. "That's what I said."

"I don't know what a ghoul is," Corrine told him.

"Something we'll discuss tomorrow evening." His voice had gone soft again and I wondered if he was regretting his harshness with her earlier.

"Okay."

"But he's been taken care of," I assured her. "Quite thoroughly from what I understand."

"Yes," Mac agreed. "Good evening, sleep tight."

"I'll see you tomorrow," she told him.

I could see the strain on her face and knew I couldn't wait until tomorrow to talk to her about it. "Are you going to walk us out?" I asked her.

When she nodded, we followed Mac and his parents into the hall. Mac handed me my coat and I put it on. Without thinking I took the stakes from the pocket of the jacket and put them at the small of my back where they belonged. His parents gave me a strange look when they saw me do it, but I wasn't going to explain my habits to them.

Mac put his own coat on, took the bag out of his pocket and handed it to Alaster.

He opened the bag and took a look inside. "Oh, good choice on this. It will be a good first gun for her." He looked up at Mac. "Your choice?"

"Yes."

Alaster smiled. "I see that you didn't forget everything."

"No," he agreed with a smile. "But I chose it more for the concealability. I pray she never has to use it."

His father nodded. "But if she does at least she'll know how."

Corrine got a stubborn look on her face at that, I knew she wasn't happy about being made to learn how to use a gun.

"Good night," Mac said, giving his mother one last hug.

To my surprise, she hugged me too, as did Alaster. Corrine and I followed Mac outside and his parents stood arm in arm in the doorway watching us go.

PAINFUL SUBJECTS

I LOVE YOU PAST THE POINT OF DYIN'
AIN'T THAT ENOUGH OF ME FOR YOU
ENOUGH OF ME - MELISSA ETHERIDGE

At the edge of the porch I hesitated and Mac stopped. I looked from him to Corrine. "Do you want to walk ahead?" I asked softly. "I'd like to talk to Corrine for a minute."

He pointed toward the barn. "I'll be around back." We watched him until he was around the corner of the house, then started to follow him at a much slower pace.

"So do you have that big of a problem with learning how to shoot the gun?" I asked my daughter.

"I just really don't see the need to," she told me. "But if everybody thinks it's such a big deal, I'll at least try. I don't like guns."

"Well, I tend to agree with you because I've never really needed one," I admitted. "But Mac seems to be pretty insistent about this and he's right about magic not always being good enough." I didn't want to tell her just how right he was.

"I know," she murmured. "Okay."

I glanced at her when she didn't say anything else. I thought I knew what the problem was but I didn't know how to broach the subject. "Actually I was kind of thinking that what upset you more was his comment about me being able to pull the gun quickly," I said finally.

"Well, you probably can."

"It wasn't that part of the comment that I thought you were reacting to," I told her. She tried to give me a blank look, but I knew her better than that. "Corrine, you know what I'm talking about. Does it bother you that much? 'Cause I can talk to him."

"I understand who and what the two of you are to me," she said softly, "but as far as—"

I cut her off. "But Gene and Martina will always be your parents."

"Exactly," she agreed firmly. "The relationship that you and I have has always been above and beyond anything that a mother and daughter could have. You know that I'm closer to you than I am to my mother. Maybe in time I can look at it in a different way, but everything is really fresh."

I knew she didn't realize how much that hurt me. She was just telling me the truth and I was so happy that she didn't think she had to lie to spare my feelings, even if her words cut me to the bone. "There's no reason for this to change anything, Corrine. You're still who you are."

"I know, but I'm worried that—" She stopped, not sure what to say. "I don't know."

"You're worried that this will interfere with your relationship with your parents," I suggested.

"No."

"You're worried that this will hurt them?"

"No, they have known that I was adopted my whole life." She took a deep breath and tried to explain. "I have known pretty much my entire life. This isn't going to change our relationship at all. I'm just worried that there are certain people that expect me to act, react and defer in a certain way, and I'm not five years old."

I smiled. "Not last time I checked."

"It's just trial and error and getting used to the whole situation," she told me. "It's weird and we just have to get used to it."

I nodded, feeling exactly the same way. "I'll talk to him."

"No," she said quickly. "Don't feel that you have to do anything like that."

Since he was probably listening I knew I wouldn't have to. "Okay, if you don't want me to talk to him, I won't."

"It's not any one specific person because I've gotten the same vibes from the whole family." She told me with a sigh. "You know, it's like Mac has been gone for so many years and they didn't know what had happened to him and they've been worried and now they know that he's...."

She paused for just a second and I understood her hesitation. Vampires are dead, but the usual term 'undead' always seems so stupid.

"...alive and not only is he alive, there's his child and everything else," she continued. "It's almost as if he's been brought back to them triple fold, you know?"

I did. "A ready made family." I'd felt the vibes too, from his parents anyway. Cara and Siofra just plain didn't like me although Siofra was a lot more obvious about it than Cara was.

"Exactly. And everything is all hunky dory and you know, that's great for them, if that's how they look at it," she told me. "I don't have a problem with that because I know who else is involved in this. And I'm not going to let them be hurt."

I couldn't blame her for not wanting the Wrights to be hurt by all this. They'd done me and Corrine a big favor when they'd adopted her, I never would have been able to raise her on my own. "And it's easy for Mac's family to ignore the fact that there is anyone else involved."

"Right," she agreed. "That's not to say that they're selfish or anything else." Already she was defending her grandparents.

"No, it wouldn't occur to them. Why would it?" They'd never met the Wrights.

"Nobody's at fault for this. It's just that-that everyone has their joy in the whole thing, but I have to remember priorities." She looked at me and I could tell she was worried. "I hope that doesn't sound too harsh or anything like that."

"You have to do what you feel is best for you," I assured her with a smile. "You're old enough now to take care of that type of thing and you have to manage however you feel most comfortable." Damn, had I really just admitted that? "Don't let anybody force anything on you."

"I don't plan on it," she said firmly. She glanced toward the barn. "Look, Mac's waiting for you, you should go spend time with him."

I touched her cheek. "You sure?"

"Yeah." She smiled and covered my hand with hers. "I've had nineteen years."

She was so grown up, when had that happened? I hugged her fiercely. "If you need me, call Mac's number," I told her.

"If you need me, call my number," she said with a grin.

I glanced after Mac, then looked at Corrine. "Do you want me to come out tomorrow afternoon when they're trying to teach you?"

"If you want," she told me. "Do you want me to come pick you up? I'm sure Grandfather will let me use the car again."

"It's not like there will be much to do in the room," I admitted. I really didn't want to sit there and watch Mac sleep. "Why don't I give you a call when I get up?"

"Okay."

I gave her one last hug then went after my lover. I caught up with him at the back of the house. "Did you catch all that?"

He tried to act all innocent. "Hmm?"

I grinned. "I'll take that as a 'yes'."

"What makes you think I was listening?" he asked.

That made me laugh. "Yeah," I said dryly. He held out an arm for me and I walked into it, putting my arm around his waist.

We walked through the cemetery and down the path to the point. It was just as beautiful as it had been the night before. We talked softly about his family and the beauty of the night as we went. We decided to check out a few of the local sights afterwards, there were several ruins and a castle nearby.

By the time we got back to the house most of the lights were off. We drove away trying to be as quiet as we could on a motorcycle and drove to the ruins.

"So are you still against the idea of being ghouled?" he asked softly as we walked through them. "Even to me?"

I looked out over the ruins wishing he hadn't broken the perfect mood. "Well, I really don't like the idea of losing all free will," I told him, "even to you."

"You've already said you have no choice when you're with me." I wasn't looking at him, but I could hear the smile in his voice. I shot him a sidelong glance and sure enough he was smiling.

"Do you really think it will be necessary?" I wanted him to tell me it wouldn't be, that we could end the contract without going that far. Wasn't it enough that I loved him, despite what he was? That I still loved him and wanted to be with him? Of course, that wouldn't be enough for Ford.

"I believe that's one of the circumstances Ford may require," he told me.

I nodded. As much as I hadn't wanted to hear that, I knew that I had to hear the truth. "How do you know he's even going to agree to renegotiate anyway?"

"I don't," he admitted. "But if he does you should be decided upon what you will and won't do. The longer you give him to think about this after we approach him, the more circumstances he may come up with."

He had a point and I knew it. "When are you going to approach him with this?" I wanted to know how long I had to think about this matter.

"I have to fly out to LA as soon as we arrive back to take care of a matter."

That was the first I'd heard of it. "For what?"

"A personal matter to take care of something with Glenn." When I shot him an intent look, he added, "Glenn is helping me, I'm not taking care of Glenn."

"Are you sure Glenn's not taking care of you?" I still didn't trust him. Mac's death would be a high price to pay if I was wrong about his intentions.

"He could try," Mac drawled.

"Yeah, well, you sleep during the day," I reminded him. "Glenn doesn't have to."

He put an arm around me and pulled me up against his side. "That's what I have you for."

I put my arm around his waist and looked up at him. "Are you saying that you want me to go to LA with you?"

He looked away. "In LA I'll have other protection."

There was something he wasn't telling me, something he didn't want me to know. I wasn't sure I wanted to know so I let it drop. "When are you going to approach Ford?" I asked again.

He thought for a moment. "A month at the most. What with Kate being no longer an upstanding member of the clan...."

"She may be up standing in a dungeon somewhere," I said dryly.

"Most of them have beds."

Like I didn't remember that, vividly. "Yeah, well, some of them have chains." I tried to drive the image of Luther's torture chamber from my mind but it was hard.

"That's more of a hanging," Mac said.

"Up hanging somewhere then," I said with a shrug. I tried to think about other things, I didn't want to dwell on what had happened in Burlington. "Well that should give Charity just enough time to run me ragged once I get back," I murmured.

"Yes," he said hesitantly. "Um, it might also help our case if you could provide the name or names of a few individuals to possibly take your place."

I didn't like what I was hearing. "You're saying you want me to hand one of them over to the clan."

"Well, most of the previous moles have been at least partially willing, due to one circumstances or another," he told me. "That I know of."

Twenty years ago Mac would never have thought about suggesting I do that. Of course he was Kindred now, his priorities and values had changed. I wondered what other things had changed that I hadn't seen yet. I pushed those questions out of my mind; I had to have faith in him or kill him, there was no in-between.

"Well, I'll see what I can do," I said in a small voice, "but I'm not sure I like the idea."

"It would take care of one of the major obstacles I can see," he replied.

"That may be, but it wouldn't make me feel any better about it." It would make me feel better if he quit pushing the issue.

"Your choice." Something about his voice told me he was irritated with me again.

"I didn't say I wouldn't do it," I grumbled. "I said I wouldn't like it."

"We all do things we don't like," he reminded me.

Like I needed the reminder. "Tell me something I don't know."

He stopped suddenly, a thoughtful look on his face. "I think you know everything."

"I don't think I know everything," I denied.

He rolled his eyes. "Here we go again. What would you like to know, dear?"

"I don't know what I don't know," I told him. "So how would I know what I want to know?"

"Are you talking in circles again?" he asked, shaking his head.

"I'm just saying I'm not all knowing." There were a lot of things out there I knew nothing about. "Is there something I should know that you haven't told me?"

"No."

We let the subject drop and talked about more pleasant things. Soon after that we left the ruins and drove over to the castle. It was quite impressive in the moonlight, but Mac's mind didn't seem to be with me.

"What's on your mind?" I asked finally.

"Hmm?" He looked at me almost like he'd forgotten I was there.

"What is it you're so deep in thought about?"

"Just thinking about things," he murmured dismissively.

I wasn't sure I liked the sound of that. "What kind of things?"

He glanced at me. "Perhaps Ford would be more willing to listen to our proposal if the ghouling process was already started."

I really didn't like the sound of that.

"It's just a thought," he said quickly.

The look I shot him told him it wasn't a good thought. I wasn't sure I was ready to think about this let alone talk about it.

"It's just a thought," he repeated.

I didn't look at him. "So what happens if he doesn't agree to renegotiate?" I asked softly. "Then I'm stuck with no free will for no good reason."

"It would only be one step," he reminded me.

One step closer to Linda. "What happens if he decides not to renegotiate?" I demanded. "I don't want to be a puppy."

"Ghoul," he corrected.

"Puppy," I said stubbornly.

"Ghoul." His voice was hard. "Kindred are very fond of their ghouls."

"Oh, yeah," I murmured sarcastically. I'd known a girl once a long time ago whose master had been so fond of her that he killed her in cold blood.

"Remember the whole playing nice conversation?" I could tell by his voice that he was starting to get impatient with me, but at that point I didn't care. This was my life we were talking about, my sanity, not his.

"I've seen how fond Kindred can be of their ghouls," I told him harshly. "Some of them aren't."

"Brenda's marrying hers," he reminded me.

"So that's an exception to the rule." Like what Brenda was doing mattered here.

"No, that's the general rule," he said firmly. "As I said it's only one step. It wouldn't—shouldn't really affect your judgments towards me or free will," he added.

I shot him a sidelong glance. "There's a big difference between wouldn't and shouldn't. Which one is it?"

"Well, I have no ghouls as it is," he said wryly, "so I don't know for sure."

"Well you sound like you're sure." He always did when he thought he was right.

He stopped and looked down at me. "Would you be willing to find out?"

That was the question, wasn't it? Was I willing to put my sanity on the line to see? There were a few other things I had to find out first. "What happens if Ford wants me ghouled but not to you?"

"Would you agree to that?" he asked. His tone told me he already knew the answer.

"That's highly doubtful," I admitted. I couldn't see giving someone else that kind of power over me. I wasn't sure I could see giving Mac that kind of power, but if it came down to a choice I'd rather give it to him than anyone else.

"That makes it an irrelevant question, luv," he said reproachfully.

He had a point. Still, becoming a vamp's puppy was not an appealing thought. "It's just that it goes against everything I've ever believed in," I said in a low voice, looking away.

He glanced down at himself, then at our clasped hands. When I looked back at him he was grinning. I'd already gone against everything I'd ever believed in, hadn't I? By admitting that I still loved Mac and wanting to be with him despite his vampness, I'd already compromised my beliefs more than I'd ever thought possible in my life.

"Oh, God," I groaned.

"I thought you didn't believe in God?" he murmured.

"What's that got to do with it?"

"When people say 'Oh God', they are usually seeking his guidance," he told me.

"Or cursing his name," I replied.

"That would be 'Goddamn it,'" he corrected.

I smiled a little, but he wasn't going to tease me into agreeing with him on this. "I guess I still need more time to think about it," I said after a long moment.

"As you wish," he said softly. When I rolled my eyes, he chuckled.

After that he paid more attention to the grounds of the castle, telling me a little of it's history. We drove around for a little while and got back to the hotel room around three in the morning. The room was quiet, and we enjoyed being together for a long time. We didn't talk necessarily, there are times when the silence says more than words ever could.

A little after five, he called Brenda to check in.

"Ah, how are you?" she asked after he identified himself.

"I'm well," he told her. "And yourself?"

They sounded almost pleasant with each other. I wondered how that happened.

"Just fine," she replied.

"I'm just checking in for the night again."

"Okay. By the time you return the two things that you asked for should be here and ready for you," she told him.

"Ah, very good." When he glanced at me, I wondered what it was he'd asked for. "I, ah, need to ask another favor. I need a firearm permit for a concealed weapon for Corrine."

"That can be arranged," she assured him. "What type of weapon are we talking about here?"

He gave her the details of the gun, right down to the serial number.

"I have her address," she told him, "but I'll need her driver's license number, social security number and birth date. I hope that this isn't infringing on anything but I'll need to have this information."

"Not at all," he said, looking expectantly at me,

What, did he think I had all that memorized? My memory wasn't quite as good as his was. "I can give you her birth date," I told him, and when I did he gave it to Brenda.

"I think that's about it. That should be taken care of as well by the time you return."

"Thank you," he murmured. "How is the family?"

"Fine," she replied. "Christina is spending a lot of time with her brother, he's here."

That seemed to remind Mac of something. "Ah, I've found a picture in Dougal's possessions that belongs to her."

"Oh really?"

"Yes, I may have Eliza mail it out in the morning," he told her. "It should arrive a day or two before I arrive back."

"All right. When are you supposed to be back?"

"Tuesday night, or sometime before the sun comes up on Wednesday," he told her.

Technically I was supposed to be back at St. Stephen's at sunrise. Charity would be expecting me.

"I will be sure to relay that along," she replied.

"How are the—" he paused to clear his throat, "—tests?"

"We're getting a lot out of her, some interesting things," she told him. "I'm sure that you will be given the okay to look at everything when you return because of your personal stake in the matter."

I couldn't stop from laughing. I pulled a stake from my back and tried to hand it to him, but he waived it away.

"It is progressing well," she added. "I think she realizes that she needs to cooperate with us because she really doesn't have a choice."

"I wish she wouldn't cooperate," I said firmly. "Cause then we could kill her faster." Did it bother me to think that way about my mother? No, she'd stopped being my mother the instant she'd planned to have Mac killed.

Mac waived at me again, trying to get me to be quiet. "What is to be done with her when the clan is finished studying her?" he asked Brenda. "Please don't tell me they're going to try and rehabilitate her."

"As far as I know her life is forfeit already," she said neutrally. "So I don't know if perhaps you or Eliza would be interested in dealing with that matter—"

"Yes," he said quickly.

"—but I can drop a hint of that into the prince's ear and see what she says if you guys are in town when it's ready to go down."

"Yes, I believe Eliza is interested, as am I," he told her.

"Stand in line," I murmured.

"You're not at the chantry," he said to me. "First come first serve."

"I can definitely mention that," Brenda replied. "So do you have any plans when you return to Salem?"

"For my stay in Salem, or immediate plans upon returning?"

"Both."

"Well, I have talked to Christina about talking to Micky about doing security for the clan," he told her.

"As far as I know she's done that already."

"But as soon as I return from this mission I need to go to LA for a night or two."

"Are you sure that's wise?" she asked.

"Why wouldn't it be?"

"There's a certain matter of a chantry leader here who is still a little upset with you," she reminded him.

"Well, not immediately as in land and take off again," he replied, "but I would like the matter taken care of before I settle in too much."

"I have had a room prepared here at the house for you if you need it," she offered. "I don't know where you were planning on staying, whether it be at the chantry or somewhere else."

"I have a few places in mind," he said softly. "A few options. So is Ford still pissed at me?"

"He's still upset, yes," she drawled. "I really haven't had much of an opportunity to talk with him, but Micky has given me the impression that yeah, he's a little pissed off still."

"It can't be too bad, he's given me the okay to continue on after Nashville."

"Yes, and I don't know exactly what happened, but from talk I guess it wasn't very good."

"I hung up on him," he admitted.

"Oh, no you didn't," she said, shocked. "God."

"Yeah."

"Okay, well, I don't know what to say about that," she said slowly. "Has he said anything about Eliza's involvement with St. Stephen's when she returns?"

"No, has he said something to you?"

"No, but I know that there is someone else that they've been able to put into place," she told him. "Someone who's a little bit higher and has a little more standing than Eliza, but it's pretty new so I don't know how it's going to work out, but it could work to your favor if you play your cards right."

I was surprised she cared about Mac's well being, or mine.

"Hmm, I guess I can count on you for some inside hands," he murmured.

"I'll let you know what I can," she told him. "I don't know what's going on. Do you know when the item will be returning? I mean no disrespect. I just need to keep a proper distance because I can't have a personal stake with this girl."

"You already do," Mac said softly.

"No I don't."

"One of your coven, Jared is her mentor," he told her.

"Well I still cannot have any contact with her," she replied, "so I need to keep my distance and arrange for surveillance."

When Mac looked questioningly at me, I said, "I think she wanted to go home this weekend, probably by Sunday."

"She'll be returning by Sunday," he said to her. "I'll be sure and let you know."

"And who's doing surveillance?" I demanded.

"There really isn't much to protect her from now that Kate is taken care of," Mac agreed.

"Yeah, but we don't know what else could have cropped up," Brenda replied. "We don't know yet if we have anyone else who will be revengeful. We don't know if there are any other ghouls around."

"Besides Simon," I murmured.

"I just want to cover all the bases," she added.

Mac glanced at me, but I couldn't deny she had a point. "Very well," he agreed. "I'll speak to you again tomorrow night."

"Okay. Have a nice evening."

"Goodnight."

He hung up the phone and I stared at him in shock. "Oh my God, you said goodnight."

"Whatever happened to Linda?" he asked thoughtfully.

"I have no idea. Why?" He'd never mentioned Linda before.

"The vengeful—"

"Ghoul thing," I finished for him. I got it.

"Yes," he agreed. "Very good. See you can say the word." He really didn't have to be so sarcastic about that.

"I haven't seen Linda since I was seventeen. I guess I just assumed that Kate got pissed off and killed her," I told him honestly. The last time I'd seen her was when she dropped me off at school they day I'd been expelled. When I'd gone home for my things she hadn't been there. "I never asked." Maybe I'd never wanted to know.

He shrugged. "Oh well."

After a moment he pulled out the grimoire and opened it to the pictures he'd been looking that the night before. He found an envelope and addressed it to Christina Strong, then wrote a brief note and wrapped it around the photograph of her. After he'd sealed the envelope, he handed it to me.

"I'll mail this tomorrow," I told him. "Theoretically I'll be seeing Corrine."

"Yes, will you be here when I awake or will I just be meeting you at the farm?"

"I planned on being here," I said firmly.

"I was just asking."

"You're not trying to get rid of me again, are you?"

"No, but I didn't want you waiting there if I thought you were going to be here or plan on being here and get held up somewhere and have me leave." He looked at me questioningly. "Stop being so suspicious luv. Christ."

"I planned on being here," I repeated.

He smiled. "Very good."

I was glad to see that he sounded like he meant it. I liked being here when he woke up even if it was hard for me to watch the life come back to his face. I guess I still wasn't quite used to him being a vampire yet.

"Don't let Corrine worm her way out of learning to shoot," he told me.

My eyebrows shot up. "Hey, you told me to get the gun, you said you would handle her learning how to shoot it."

"Actually I believe that Da is taking care of that," he murmured. "At least starting her."

"You said you'd take care of it and all I'd have to do was get the gun," I reminded him. I really didn't want to try and butt heads with Corrine about learning to shoot.

"I am taking care of it," he said firmly. "Don't let her worm her way out of it. There, it's taken care of."

I laughed at his dry humor. "Just don't ask me to teach her how to do it cause I have no clue."

"I didn't say 'teach her how to do it', did I?" he asked impatiently.

What was his damage? "You're a little testy tonight."

"Nonsense," he told me. "You're just not listening."

I shook my head and smiled. "I don't remember anything in my contract saying that I had to listen."

"Do it because you love me." There was that voice again, the one that sent chills up my spine.

"Oh, like that's fair," I muttered. "When do you listen to me?"

"How many times have you actually told me to do something, or asked me to do something, luv?" he asked patiently.

"I don't know," I said thoughtfully. "Are you saying you would if I did?"

He studied my face. "That depends on what you're asking."

"Haven't we had this conversation?" I asked with a smile.

"Multiple times," he agreed. "It depends on what you're asking me to do."

"I haven't asked you to do anything, at least not tonight," I reminded him.

"Just let me know luv," he drawled with a leering grin on his face, which of course I matched.

"Well, it's getting kinda late," I told him. It was almost five thirty and what I wanted from him would take a lot longer than thirty minutes. "Maybe tomorrow."

"Oh?"

"It's a little late tonight," I said, pointing at the clock on the wall.

"As you wish," he replied.

Well, we'd see if I got what I wished tomorrow night.

"I assume you heard the conversation with Brenda," he murmured. When I laughed, he added. "No, wait, I know you did."

"I participated in the conversation with Brenda," I reminded him. "You were there."

He smiled. "Oh, you're just a riot."

"I try so hard," I said dryly. "Someone has to keep you amused. Stop you from that 'Cormac mode' that you fall into all the time."

"I resemble that remark," he drawled.

"Quite," I agreed. "If I don't keep you out of it, who will?"

"I don't always go into 'Cormac mode'," he denied.

"Uh-huh." Sure he didn't. And I didn't freak out, either.

"Well, if there's nothing else, what time are you and Corrine getting together today?"

I shrugged. "I don't know, I figured either she'd call me or I'd call her when I get up, if you don't mind me using your phone." Not that I hadn't been using it anyway.

He handed it to me. "Have fun." He kissed me on the cheek and went into the bathroom. After my turn in there, we snuggled on the bed until he zoned out at dawn.

It took me a little longer to get to sleep. I kept wondering what it would be like to live life like Linda, no free will, no life of my own. It wasn't a pretty picture.

When I finally did sleep, my dreams reflected my waking fears. I dreamed I was a puppet and that Mac was holding the strings. No matter how hard I fought or how loud I screamed, he kept making me do things I didn't want to do.

HEARTBREAK

I AM NOT SUNSHINE I AM DARK AND GRAY
FOR THIS LIFE OF SINS I LIVE EACH DAY I PAY
DARK AND GRAY — KID ROCK

I woke in a cold sweat, held tightly against something hard and unyielding. It took me a minute to realize that it was Mac and that he was holding me in whatever state Kindred had that passed for sleep.

It took me a while before I felt like I could move without shaking. I laid there with my head on his shoulder and tried not to listen for the heartbeat I knew wouldn't be there. The thought crossed my mind that if his heart didn't beat, how could he love me? I buried that thought as quickly as I could. It was a little late to be second-guessing myself, wasn't it? Way too late.

It didn't really matter anyway, did it? We had less than a week to be together, I could live with my doubts that long. After Wednesday they wouldn't matter anymore. As much as I wanted to trust him, I didn't know if I could make myself become like Linda. When my silent tears fell onto his cold skin, I was glad that he slept like the dead.

A long time later I made myself get up. I'd told Corrine that I'd call her when I got up and if I waited much longer to do that, she'd be worried about me. I took a fast shower, more to clean the evidence of tears from my face than anything else. Then I took a deep breath and called my daughter.

"Did you sleep well last night?" I asked softly.

"Sure I did," she told me. "Did you?"

"Today, not last night," I said, avoiding the question. "I didn't go to bed until dawn."

"Right."

"I'm trying to stay on Mac's schedule," I reminded her.

"I understand absolutely."

"So how was the family after we left?" I asked. "Tolerable?"

"Oh sure," she said dismissively. "How was Mac?"

"He was Mac," I replied, smiling, "as he always is."

"Are you guys going to stop out tonight?"

"Probably for a little while anyway." Mac was supposed to show her how to shoot. "What have you been doing today?"

"Just spending time with the grandparents and doing some studying with Jared."

"That's good. How is it going?"

"Okay."

"You don't sound real enthusiastic." Actually, she sounded like something was wrong.

"Well I mean, it's like a slow road," she told me. "It's not coming real easy, but it's coming."

I wished there was something I could help her with, but I knew she had to do this on her own. "Well don't let them push you into it," I said firmly. "If you think that they're going too fast or too far or too much or if this isn't what you want, you know you don't have to do this. You don't have to."

"Don't worry," she assured me. "I'm okay."

"Yeah," I said dryly. "Don't worry. Yeah, sure."

"I talked to a friend of mine from Salem last night," she said slowly, changing the subject.

"Oh, did you? Which one?" And what did they say?

"Samantha Brown."

Rafe's sister. This could not be good. "The girl that worked at Mother Abigail's," I said aloud, shooting for an even tone. "I guess I didn't realize that you two were friends."

"Well, we're not really close, close," she admitted, "but we've managed to swap numbers and I gave her a call to see what was going on in class because of the missed time but unfortunately she's missed some time as well."

I couldn't imagine that Kate and Simon had left her in perfect condition. "Oh? How come?"

"It seems as if she was spending some time with someone near and not so dear to both of us," she said, confirming the worst-case scenario I had for their conversation.

I knew exactly where this was going but I didn't want her to know that. "Okay, I think you're going to have to show me the math," I told her. "Who would that be?"

"Your mother."

"Kate?" I didn't like her being called my mother, not even by Corrine.

"Yes." There was hesitation in her voice, but she kept on. "She told me what happened, that her brother Rafe and Brenda showed up there to get her out."

The hits just kept coming, didn't they? Next she was going to tell me she wanted to get to know Brenda because she was Kindred like Mac. "Oh? Is she okay?" I really did care, I liked Samantha.

"Yeah, but she's in bed for a while," Corrine told me. "She got roughed up quite a bit, but she says she's going to be okay. I can't wait to get back and check in on her. She's a really nice girl and I hate to see her suffer because of any of my family."

"Not that Kate was real good family," I muttered darkly.

"Yes, but you know blood is thicker than water," she said, oblivious to my mood. "We do have to take responsibilities for the actions of others sometimes."

Is that what she really thought? Did Kate's blood taint me in her eyes? "Yeah, that's true enough," I said, my voice sounding much like I felt, lifeless. What would I do if Corrine hated me for Kate's actions? "Sometimes. But she's okay?"

"Yeah, she's okay. It was quite an interesting conversation."

Bloody wonderful. "In what way?"

"She told me about her brother," she said softly. "I now know what a ghoul is, that's always a good thing to know."

"Rafe." I tried to soften my voice, but I'm not sure how good I did. I'd told her about Brenda, and if she knew about Rafe, then I'm sure she knew that his Brenda was the one I'd been talking about in Nashville.

"Yeah. He sounds like a really nice guy," she told me. "Samantha told me about his girlfriend and she sounds like a really nice person, too. I was hoping to get to know her better since Mac apparently may be staying there when he gets back into town. She is the Brenda you were talking about, isn't she?"

"Yeah." I closed my eyes and wished Corrine hadn't overheard that part of my conversation with Mac. And just how the hell was I supposed to deal with her wanting to meet more vamps? The contract didn't allow it. "I don't know that that's a good idea, Corrine."

"Why is that?" Her voice had that tone to it again, the one that told me she thought I was trying to run her life. I wasn't trying to run her life, just save it.

"Well, ah, you know Brenda has her own circles that she runs in." It sounded weak, even to my ears, but I was trying not to panic and it was hard to think.

"Yeah, I know. She has her friend Christina that lives there and a few other people."

More vamps. "Yeah, um, but maybe you should think about it for a while before making any decisions like that."

"Why?" she demanded. "What would be the problem?"

"Well, um, just—" Fuck. What the hell was I supposed to say without telling her about the contract? "Just don't do anything until I get back in town, okay? Can you do that? I'll be back Wednesday."

"Can I go pee without you?"

Yeah, she was pissed. "Just um, just don't go hunting vampires."

"Oh, trust me," she said, her voice hard and cold, "I won't be hunting anybody. I would never deem myself to be that important a person to hunt anything."

What the fuck was going on? I'd told her we'd fought the Kindred in Baltimore, had someone told her that we'd actually hunted them? "Well, I guess you got to do what you got to do." It was hard for me to keep the tears from my voice, but somehow I managed. Time to change the subject. "So are you going to be busy out there today?"

"I'm just spending time with grandma and grandpa," she told me. "If you'd like to come out, I don't think there'd be a problem. Do you want me to come pick you up?"

"Would you like that?" I didn't want to force myself on her, especially in the frame of mind she was in.

"Sure."

"Then yes, as long as you can bring me back here before Mac wakes up."

"I'll ask grandfather and I'm sure he'll say yes," she said. "I'll be in town about half an hour."

"I'll be waiting downstairs."

After I hung up the phone I went back into the bedroom. I stood staring down at Mac for a few minutes, still trying to make up my mind about the whole ghouling thing. Rationally I knew that my dream had just taken my fears and amplified them, but a part of me believed that it could really happen. After all, it had happened to Linda, hadn't it?

When Corrine pulled up to the curb I was just walking out of the building. I got into the car and tried to smile. "Hey."

"Hey," she said softly. "I hope you don't mind, but I don't feel like going back out to the farm just yet. Are you hungry? Do you want to get something to eat?"

"Sure," I said, hiding my relief. I so did not want to deal with Siofra and Glen today. Or Cara. "What do you want to eat?"

We agreed on an outdoor café and when we got there we sat in the sunlight. It felt good to feel the sun's rays on my face. It made me wonder if Mac missed it.

"I need an ice tea in the worst way," Corrine murmured as we looked at the menu.

"Yeah, I'm pretty parched too," I agreed. "There's nothing in that room except water." And blood, wherever Mac was keeping it, but lets not go there.

"Well, maybe we could stop somewhere and pick up some stuff for you to keep there," she suggested. "Is there a fridge?"

"Yeah, a small one," I told her. "But it's no big deal."

"Well God, you can't starve yourself," she said firmly. "What good is that going to do?"

"Actually I'm pretty hungry. I haven't eaten since—" Wait, when had I eaten? "Well since dinner last night." No wonder I was hungry.

"Yeah, we're definitely shopping."

"You know Mac tends to forget the food thing," I said dismissively. It wasn't his job to make sure I ate.

"He's a man, he has no sense," she replied.

"He's also not in need of it himself," I reminded her.

The waitress came and we ordered our meal. Corrine made sure I ordered a lot and I had to smile at the way she was trying to watch over me. While we were waiting for our food, Corrine told me that Jared was taking her home on Saturday.

"I'm going to miss another one of our Sunday dinners," I told her.

"Yeah, but you have a good excuse," she said.

"I'll be in Ireland, you'll be in America. But I'll be back on Wednesday morning, although I'll have to go right to St. Stephen's." I looked away, for a moment thinking about what I'd have to do when I got back. "I'm sure there will be some things I'll have to check up on," I murmured.

"So are you going to leave there?" She made it sound as if it should be easy for me to do that.

"I'm checking into it," I said reluctantly.

"How hard will it be?"

She had no idea. "That's the ten thousand dollar question," I told her, trying to smile. "I don't know yet, it depends. There are a few things we need to work out. I guess it depends on how bad I want out."

"How bad do you want out?"

She was watching me closely and I kept my face carefully blank. "Well, I don't know, you know? It depends on what I'm willing to do and willing to not do." That was as close to the truth as I wanted to go. "I don't know, it's hard to explain."

"Okay," she said, but the look on her face told me it wasn't okay.

I sighed. "I shouldn't say that because I know you get mad when I say that." Where to begin and still not tell her everything? What was I supposed to say to her? Your father wants me to drink his blood and lose all personality just so I can be with him and keep you safe? That would be a big 'no'.

"Um, there are certain things that I have to do before I can get released from the employment there and I will probably have to make certain compromises," I told her after a moment's thought. "If I'm willing to make those compromises, then it shouldn't be a problem. The question is am I willing to make those compromises. I don't know if I am."

"I'm sure you'll do what's best," she told me reassuringly.

I'm glad someone was. "That's what I've always tried to do, Corrine," I told her seriously. "I know it doesn't always work that way, but it's what I've always tried for." I've tried for it my whole life but it seemed like everything always got fucked up somehow, one way or another.

"I know."

"So, any deep philosophical discussions with the family?" I asked.

"I talked with Glenn a little bit last night," she admitted.

That wasn't what I'd expected her to say. "Oh? And what did Glenn have to say?"

"Let's just say that he's not one of my most favorite people right now," she told me.

"Why is that?"

She shrugged. "He's just not exactly easy to get along with."

I could tell by the tone of her voice that she wasn't going to tell me anything else. Damn, I didn't need this now. Weren't things hard enough for me to deal with without shit like this cropping up?

Before I could question her about what exactly Glenn had said, the waitress brought our food. We talked about other things while we ate, but afterwards I tried to bring the conversation back to Glenn.

"So what did you talk to Glenn about?" I asked, shooting for a nonchalant tone.

The look on her face said I wasn't fooling her. "Don't worry about it," she told me. "It wasn't important."

"If he upset you, it is important," I told her.

She shook her head and took my hand. "No," she replied softly. "He isn't important. What's important is that we have each other and that you and Mac are finally getting a chance to be together."

Were we? Or was I going to ruin our chances by not agreeing to be his puppy? I tried to smile. "We have a chance at a new beginning," I agreed. "If things work out, we could be—" I was going to say 'a family', but I didn't think Corrine would take that well. "We could."

I glanced at a nearby clock and saw that it was after four. Where had the time gone? "Look, I know Alaster wanted you to go out to the firing range with him this afternoon," I told her. "There isn't time for me to go with you and still be back before Mac gets up, especially if you wanted to stop and shop. We should probably get going."

A stubborn look crossed her face. "I could skip it."

"No, Corrine," I said firmly, "you can't. As much as you hate this, it's for your own good."

She looked away. "I know."

"If it makes you feel any better, Mac actually got me to fire a gun a few nights ago."

At that she looked at me in surprise. "Really?" She knew I never so much as picked up guns because I was afraid the wrong person would get shot. That's how bad I'd been with a gun twenty years ago, anyway.

"Really."

"I guess I'd better go," she said reluctantly. She paid the bill and we stopped at a small grocery store to buy some food and mail Mac's letter before she took me back to the boarding house.

We hugged and kissed before I got out of the car and I watched her drive away wondering what else could possibly go wrong. I mean, after all I'd done to make sure she wasn't hurt by vamps in her life, now she wanted to run right out and be warm and fuzzy with them. And it really seemed like she knew exactly what Mac and I had been involved in at the brownstone, even though she hadn't come right out and said it.

Well it was no use standing on the sidewalk thinking about it. I went up to the room and told myself that I should find something else to worry about. God knew there was enough in my life.

ARGUMENTS

ARE YOU GONNA STAND THERE?
ARE YOU GONNA HELP ME OUT?
WE NEED TO BE TOGETHER NOW
I NEED YOU NOW
MAD SEASON — MATCHBOX TWENTY

When the sun went down I was pacing in the sitting room. Mac peeked out from the bedroom and when he saw I was alone came out in his usual tank top and slacks.

"Good morning," he told me.

"Good evening," I corrected him, trying to hide my irritation. "Are we going to have this conversation every time the sun goes down?"

He smiled. "If we're lucky, yes."

I stopped and looking at him, wondering if we could get that lucky. If I could argue with him about that every night of my life I'd be more than happy. Somehow I didn't think that was going to happen and the thought of losing him again hurt so badly I wanted to cry.

His smile disappeared. "Yes dear?" he said expectantly.

"What?"

"What's wrong?"

I sighed. "I didn't realize I was that transparent."

"Well, kinda fleshy," he murmured, "but...."

"Yeah." Since I wasn't ready to talk about our future, I settled on talking about our daughter. "Well, it's just that Corrine is a little headstrong."

"Your daughter, headstrong?" he said with mock indignation. "No, really?"

That made me smile. "Yeah, *your* daughter is."

"Why?"

I started pacing again. "Well, you know there's this girl back in Salem that she had this conversation about Kindred with after we left your parent's house," I told him. "And this girl apparently told her about Brenda."

"Mm-hmm." He didn't seem concerned.

"And Corrine has it stuck in her head that she needs to meet more of your family," I added.

"She's met all of my family," he told me.

"Not the Tremere part of your family."

He looked at me calmly. "Did you explain to her why she couldn't?"

"No." Definitely not.

"You want me to explain to her why she can't?" he asked.

"No." Was he not listening? I didn't want her to find out about the contract.

"Then you're just going to let her—"

"No." Emphatically not.

"Then what?"

It was about obvious to me. "We're going to come up with an alternate plan."

"You tell her, I tell her, we let her find out on her own."

"No, no, no," I said firmly. "We stop her from visiting Kindred another way."

He seemed amused. "Just how do you propose we do that?"

"You tell me, you're the brain," I reminded him.

"I'm all for her having all the facts," he replied. "You've known that from the beginning."

God, was he deaf? "I don't think it would be good for her to know all the facts," I told him irritably. "I think it would upset her." And then some.

"Unless we can stifle her inquisitiveness," he murmured.

I knew he could come up with something. "Okay, what do you suggest we say?"

He thought for a moment. "That there are circumstances in place that prohibit her from meeting any other members of my family."

Like that would settle it. "And she'll want to know what those circumstances are."

"Beyond our control, for the moment," he replied.

I could tell he was starting to get irritated with me, but at that point I didn't care. Keeping Corrine blissfully ignorant was way more important. "And do you really think she's going to settle for that?"

"What's your idea?" he demanded.

"I don't have one." If I had the slightest idea, would we be having this conversation? Didn't he think I'd have taken care of it already?

"Well, when you come up with something better, let me know." With that he turned around and went back into the bedroom to change.

I watched him through the open door, wanting so badly to share my fears that Corrine had learned exactly what we'd done in Baltimore. Thing was, he was already cold enough to give me frostbite and I didn't think I could take it if he got any worse. Besides, I could be wrong, right? It was possible that Corrine wasn't pissed about the things we'd done in Baltimore. Someday I have to be wrong when it comes to expecting bad shit to happen.

"You're going to explain this to her so I don't have to argue with her any more today," I told him, hoping that he would agree.

"So if I'm explaining it to her then I get to tell her as much as I feel she needs to know," he said as he dressed in black pants and a tee shirt.

"No." God no. He'd tell her everything.

"Enough to, ah, quench her inquisitiveness," he suggested.

"That would be everything, she's a little inquisitive," I said, exasperated. "I don't want her to know everything."

He strapped on his figure eight and turned toward me, his face hard. "Well then you figure out something to tell her."

I couldn't believe he wasn't going to help me with this. Didn't he realize that Corrine would freak out when she found out the reason I was working at St. Stephen's? When she found out exactly what I did and that I did it all for her?

It was hard to keep my control, but somehow I managed. "She may be a big girl," I told him, my voice as hard as his face, "but I think that she would be a little hurt by the arrangements that have been made. And a little pissed. So therefore she doesn't need to know."

"Well then, you get to explain it to her. Are you coming?" he demanded as he put his coat on. He was in full Cormac mode, obviously not willing to budge an inch from his firm belief that knowledge is power.

Like I was going to leave him alone with Corrine so he could tell her everything he thought she needed to know. "Yeah, I'm coming."

"Good," he drawled. "I feel the need to shoot something." He grabbed his usual backpack and the duffel bag I knew all his extra weapons were in. On the way out he put his cell phone in his pocket.

I threw on my jacket and followed him out the door. Without a word we went down to the bike where he shoved the bags into the saddlebags on the bike and put on his helmet. A few minutes later we were on our way to the farm.

I didn't like the strain between us, it reminded me of how much things had changed in our lives. There was nothing I could do about it though, I couldn't agree that Corrine needed to know every thing and he wouldn't budge on it.

The wind on my face felt good, but it didn't help with the worry I felt over Corrine's involvement with Brenda, or any vamps other than Mac. I trusted him not to hurt her, but did I really trust any of the rest of them? Mac had told me I needed to change my attitude toward Kindred and I really was trying, but when it came down to Corrine I knew I'd have to watch out for her safety before anything else, even Mac.

Would that stand between us in the end? Would my overwhelming need to protect Corrine at all costs drive a wedge between us as nothing else had? Hell, I could forgive him for being a damned vamp, but I knew I couldn't forgive him if he put our daughter in danger.

When we got to the farm almost everyone was on the porch enjoying a pre-dinner drink. Noinen was the only one missing and I figured she was inside making dinner, a fact Alaster soon confirmed.

Corrine was sitting on the swing by herself and everyone else was seated either in chairs or the bench under the window. There were several candles lit, as well as the porch light. Mac refused the offer of a chair while I went to sit next to Corrine. She made way for me, which made me feel a little better.

"How was your outing this afternoon with Corrine?" Alaster asked me. He hadn't seemed to notice the tension between Mac and me.

"Fine," I told him. "We found a little café to eat at."

He smiled beamingly at Corrine. "We did some target shooting this afternoon and she did extremely well for her first try."

"That's good to hear," Mac said. "I have a little more to teach her."

Alaster nodded as if he'd expected Mac to say that, but Corrine pointedly stayed out of the conversation. She seemed upset about something but I wasn't sure what. If I had to guess, I'd have to say it was them talking about her learning to shoot. Before I could ask her about it, Noinen came to the door.

"Dinner's ready," she called out. Then she saw her son leaning against the rail. "Oh, Macalaster, it's good to see you," she exclaimed. She came out onto the porch and hugged him. "Come on in." She looked around and found me sitting next to Corrine. "Eliza, dear, are you all right?" she asked, concerned. "You look famished. Come on, time for dinner."

I guess I wasn't hiding my worry as well as I'd thought because she seemed to see it. I could see Mac grin and I didn't like that he was so amused about this.

"You know we really must do something about you," she said thoughtfully as she walked over and took my hand. "We need to put some meat on your bones, young lady."

As we walked past Mac I could see him grinning. Noinen led me into the house by the hand and I had no choice but to follow unless I wanted to be rude. And I didn't, at least not to her. Now if it had been Siofra, I wouldn't have bothered with politeness, but I didn't want to argue with Mac's mother, so I let her lead me into the house ahead of everyone else.

It wasn't until I heard the door close that I realized that Mac and Corrine had stayed outside. I tried to look out of the window to see them, but Noinen was leading me to a seat and encouraging me to sit down. She fussed over me until Mac and Corrine came in a few minutes later.

Dinner was much different than it had been the night before. There was a definite chill in the air and it seemed to be coming from Corrine. I noticed that she was very cold toward Glenn, and noticeable cooler to Siofra and Cara, although for the women she was at least polite.

Glenn seemed a little uncomfortable, and he kept looking between me, Mac and Corrine as if he expected one of us to blow up. It made me wonder if he'd been the one to tell my daughter the details about what had happened in Baltimore, although since Jared was also jumpy I figured it might have been him.

Noinen did her best to keep the conversation going at the table and I tried to help her, but I guess I wasn't in the mood to be overly polite. Stress tends to make me cranky and I was definitely stressed to the max.

After dinner, the women of Mac's family got up and cleared the table. Jared excused himself to do some studying in his room, while Glenn and Bobby announced they were going into town. Just before he left, Glenn turned and looked as if he was going to say something, but he must have changed his mind because he left without another word.

While Alaster was talking softly with Corrine, I leaned closer to Mac. "What were you talking to Corrine about outside?" I asked in a low voice.

"Nothing," he said innocently.

My eyebrows shot up but before I could call him on the obvious lie, Alaster interrupted us.

"Well, let's go have another crack at the target, shall we?" he suggested.

When Mac got to his feet, so did I. I wasn't about to be left here to the tender mercies of the women in his family. Corrine wasn't as enthusiastic, but she came. She fell back a little as we walked away from the house, and I dropped back beside her.

"So what did you and Mac talk about before dinner?" I asked softly.

"Nothing really," she told me. "He asked me about my conversation with Samantha. He wanted to discuss things further but I told him that it wasn't the time."

When I saw Mac glance at his watch, I knew he was listening and I let the subject drop.

The firing range was a good ten minutes walk east of the house. It was fairly modern, with lights illuminating the target for night practice and low benches nearby for spectators. I found a tree to lean against and watched, glad that he wasn't making me practice.

Mac had Corrine go through a couple of clips, but she wasn't doing very well. Alaster chastised her gently, reminding her that she'd done much better that afternoon, which prompted a halfhearted apology from my daughter.

"She needs to clear her mind of other distractions," Mac said firmly.

Corrine raised her eyebrows and looked coolly at Mac, but when she tried it again she did do much better. He let her go through another clip before he stepped forward.

"Now that you know how to shoot, or have a better idea," he said, his voice calm and even, "and you know what else is out there, regular bullets won't do jack shit against supernaturals aside from Mages and hunters."

Alaster nodded in agreement as we watched Mac pull a bullet from his jacket pocket and hold it up.

"This is a regular nine millimeter," he told her. When he was sure she knew what it looked like, he laid it down on a bench and pulled out another bullet from his pocket. "This is silver. It is deadly to Garou and harder for Vampires to soak."

He laid it next to the first one and pulled the gun from the small of his back. "It does no more damage, though," he said before squeezing off a few rounds at target. The holes it made looked exactly like the ones Corrine had made with the normal rounds.

Mac put that gun away and pulled out another bullet, this one longer than the others. "This is white phosphorous. It explodes on contact. It is deadly to my kind." He pulled one of the guns from his figure eight and shot once at the target, which immediately exploded into flame.

Corrine looked impressed, but she also looked stricken by the knowledge Mac had about killing things. Her face was sad as she watched the target burn.

"Would you care to try?" Mac asked, oblivious to her mood.

"No, thank you," she said with an excess of politeness.

Suddenly I knew what he was going to do but before I could open my mouth to stop him, Mac had pulled the other gun and was firing them both at the target. He stopped only when it was completely demolished, lowering the guns to his sides and watching the remains of the target burn.

I stepped forward and saw what I'd known was coming; tears on Corrine's face. I tried to hug her but she moved away. I didn't know what to do; I had no idea how to handle her reaction. I felt like I had when Martina had called to tell me that Corrine had run away when she was seventeen; helpless, hopeless. I glared at Mac knowing that if he hadn't been so damn insistent that she learn to shoot this wouldn't be happening.

"Bite me," he muttered as he put his guns away and walked closer to Corrine.

Even in the midst of this shit I couldn't help remembering my teeth on his shoulder when we'd made love. I was glad the darkness hid the blush I felt staining my cheeks.

Alaster must have finally noticed there was something wrong, because he asked Corrine what the matter was.

"I'm sorry," Corrine replied. "No, I'm fine."

She wasn't fine and I didn't quite understand why she was so upset, but I had an idea. It was one thing to know your parents had fought things, quite another to have the method they used to kill them shoved in your face. "Corrine, it was just a target," I said soothingly

"I won't use those," she said stubbornly. "You can't make me." She looked like she was going to burst out crying as she looked pleadingly at her Alaster. "Grandfather, please don't let them make me."

"I hope you never have to," Mac told her gently.

"Generally a stake is more effective anyway," I murmured. Wood in the heart stopped a vamp cold but they had a habit of coming after you when you shot them, even with white phosphorous.

"You have to get close enough first," he told me evenly.

"Unless you can throw it," I replied in the same tone of voice.

"You have to get close enough first," he repeated coldly.

I didn't answer. My methods had worked served me well for a long time and nothing he said would make me feel any differently.

"I won't be like you," Corrine said defiantly through her tears. "I won't do that." She backed away from us warily.

I shot a hard look at Mac for upsetting her like this, but he just glanced at his watch.

"I think this would be the time for us to have that discussion, Corrine," he told her. "All of us."

She was looking down at the ground and I could see that she was shaking. I wanted to take her in my arms and tell her that everything would be all right, that the past didn't matter and that everything would be okay. The thing was that I didn't want to lie to her. She was a big girl now, and as much as I hated it, she had to face the truth some day. If I lied to her now, she'd never forgive me.

For real now, I still hunted things didn't I? I still killed things based on the target's race. As long as my contract remained in effect I had no choice. How could I tell her we weren't what she thought when I most certainly still was?

Mac stepped closer and pulled her into his arms where she stood stiffly without moving. After a minute, he pulled away with his hands on her shoulders and hunched down a little to see her face. "We have all night, dear," he said softly.

She looked up at him accusingly and I knew that she didn't want to talk about this. I also knew that Mac wouldn't let it rest.

"We can do this when you *calm* down." The slight emphasis he gave the word 'calm' told me he was dominating her. I might have gotten pissed if I didn't know that he was doing it for her own good.

Not surprisingly, she calmed down and looked at him. I rubbed my eyes to try and stop the headache I felt forming.

"Are you ready?" he asked her softly.

She nodded but looked past him pleadingly at Alaster. Mac turned to follow her gaze. Alaster was standing behind him with a stricken look on his face. He looked like he wanted to interfere, but it really wasn't his call to make. Finally he smiled reassuringly at Corrine and nodded.

Mac turned back to his daughter. "So what's on your mind, dear?" He had a very serious look on his face, but he was trying to be gentle with her.

"I won't kill anybody because of what they are," she told him in a small voice.

I'd thought that was what she was upset about but somehow hearing it made it so much worse. I covered my eyes and turned away from the pain slashing at my heart.

"That's good," Mac replied softly. "Who told you what we did?"

"Does that really matter?"

"Yes."

"I don't want to cause any more strife within the family," she said rebelliously.

"So was it Glenn, Cara or Siofra?" he asked, his voice noticeably harder. "Or Bobby? Or all?"

"It doesn't matter," she insisted.

"Yes, it does."

"It was an inadvertent conversation and the person did not intend to divulge what they knew," Corrine said firmly. "But it happened and that doesn't make it right."

"Who was it?" Mac demanded.

She got that defiant look on her face again. "It doesn't matter and I'm not telling you," she bit out. "You're just trying to take away from the seriousness of what you guys did."

"You're damning us for something we did before your birth?" Mac demanded.

I walked away and sat down hard on one of the benches nearby, leaning forward and dropping my face into my hands, fighting not to break down and cry. He seemed to be forgetting that even though he'd stopped hunting twenty years ago, I hadn't. I had more blood on my hands than I cared to think about, certainly more than I ever wanted Corrine to learn about.

"I'm trying not to," she told him. "But then again, none of us are judges and we have no right to take someone else's existence into our own hands."

"We were wrong, I admit it," he replied calmly. "I have admitted it. What else would you like me to do?"

She shook her head. "There's nothing you can do, it's just something that I have to come to terms with." She looked over at the burning target. "And seeing the light display just brought home how into it everybody was. Now you're trying to teach me—"

He didn't let her finish. "I'm trying to teach you how to protect yourself," he said firmly.

"That's very well and good," she drawled, "but there are other ways that I can protect myself without making a bonfire."

"Like what?" he demanded.

"Things that Jared is teaching me."

"If you go home and something of the dark jumps you, what will you do, Corrine?" he asked harshly. "Jared hasn't taught you that much."

"I'll just have to be careful until I know it," she insisted.

"Sometimes the security of your own home isn't careful enough," he told her. "Magic by itself is not enough."

I bit my lip hard to stop myself from screaming. For a moment I was blinded by memories of our struggle with the vamps in our apartment, Dougal's teeth in my lover's throat. Mac's magic hadn't been enough to save either of us that night.

"And I know that you're proof of that," she said sadly, "but I cannot bring myself to do that."

"No one is asking you to," he told her impatiently. He was getting mad and I hoped he'd keep a hold on his temper. "Who dug up the past?" When Corrine drew a breath to speak, he added harshly, "And yes, it's relevant, child."

She shook her head stubbornly.

"I need to know," he told her.

"What difference does it make?" she asked stubbornly.

"My clan finds out what I did, do you know what they'll do to me?"

Considering Dougal had been Tremere, and he'd known full well what we'd been doing in Baltimore, I would think they already knew. But I didn't say that, I didn't think Mac would appreciate me putting my two cents in just then. He was mad enough at me already.

"I don't know," she whispered.

"Would you like to know what they'll do to me?" he demanded. When she looked away, he sighed. "I won't harm them," he told her, his voice much softer. "I just need to know who it was."

In a voice so soft I had to strain to hear it she whispered, "It was Glenn."

Damn, I knew that bastard would fuck things up somehow. What the hell had he said to her? When I saw him I was going to let him know just how unhappy I was with him. With my fists. It was time to resurrect some of my old anger management techniques.

Corrine backed away from Mac and I could see the effort he took to calm himself. "Is that all that's on your mind?"

She nodded, still not looking directly at him.

"As I've said, what we did was wrong," he told her in a much softer voice. "I know it now. I've come to terms with it, your mo—Eliza has come to terms with it. I can't make you accept it or understand it or like it. It's something you must come to terms with on your own, in your own time."

I wanted to cry; I'd always known that Mac would make a wonderful father. I ached over the years they might have had together, the lost moments like this one when he could have helped her through the rough times in her life. I couldn't help thinking that he would have done a much better job than I had.

Corrine nodded, but there were tears again in her eyes. He pulled her into his arms and this time she went willingly. She put her arms around his waist and tucked her face into his neck, holding on tightly. I turned away and brushed at my own tears.

When she'd finally calmed down, Mac stepped back. "So I hear you want to meet the rest of my," he paused to clear his throat, "family."

Before Corrine could answer I was on my feet. "Mac," I said warningly, just in case he'd forgotten that I really didn't want her to know the truth about the contract.

She looked at him curiously. "There's more of your family?"

"Brenda," he said patiently.

"You mean the Kindred in Salem?" she asked. "I thought about it."

"Don't," he told her firmly.

There was a flash of defiance in her eyes. "You can't tell me what to do."

"There are certain, ah, circumstances in place in Salem and within the Kindred," he said hesitantly. "We are not to have contact with you."

"Ri-ight," she drawled. It was obvious she didn't believe him.

He was getting too close to the truth for my tastes. "Mac," I growled, but he wasn't listening. He was back in full Cormac mode.

"There is," he said seriously in that emotionless voice. "My life depends on it, Eliza's life depends on it, yours depends on it, and the lives of others of my clan depend on it."

I could tell she didn't understand and that was just fine with me. Before I could step in to stop the conversation before it went to far, it did.

"Are you talking about the contract?" Alaster asked.

Three pairs of eyes turned on him.

"What contract?" The only thing that stopped Corrine's voice from being demanding was the fact that she was talking to her grandfather.

Fuck.

There was no getting out of it now, no turning back. Corrine was going to find out exactly what I'd been doing for the last ten years and why. As much as I wanted to strike out at Alaster for mentioning the contract, I knew that would just make things worse.

I glared at Mac, but he was looking at Corrine. This was all his fault, he'd walked right in and taken over my life just like he had twenty years ago. You know, most of the time I don't mind, but in this particular instance, I did. I wanted him to lie about the contract, but I knew he was going to tell her the truth no matter what I said or did because that was what he thought was the right thing to do.

"Don't say I didn't warn you," I growled at him. It took everything I had to turn and walked away from the only two people I've ever really loved in my entire life.

SHEDDING THE PAST

HOW CAN I FEEL IF I CAN'T BREATHE?
WHAT WE ONCE HAD WILL NEVER BE AGAIN
SITUATION - GODSMACK

It was over, finally over. Any second now Corrine would hate me for everything I'd ever done to protect her. The last ten years of killing whatever I had to really had stolen every thing I'd ever cared about. The only thing I could do was walk away and not look back.

Glenn would probably see me back to Salem, right after I kicked his ass for starting this whole mess. Maybe I should ask him to take me back first, have him come with me, and then kick his ass. I was so busy planning my anger management that I didn't notice Alaster had caught up with me until he spoke.

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

I stopped for a moment and looked off into the woods. "You had no idea she didn't know," I replied in a cool voice. I wasn't in the mood for being nice, but most of the time I liked Alaster.

"Still, it was not my intention to interfere with your relationship with Corrine," he said apologetically.

I glanced at him and started walking again, slower this time. "I was stupid to think she'd never find out about it," I admitted. "I just never wanted her to feel guilty for the choices I made to protect her."

"Are you sure she'll take it that badly?"

"You saw how she reacted to the phosphorous on the target," I reminded him. "Do you really think she'd like the fact that I've killed preternatural creatures for the last ten years just to protect her?"

"You may have a point," he conceded. The tone of his voice made me wonder how he felt about it. "Still, she may surprise you."

We walked out of the trees into the clearing around the house and stopped. I turned and looked behind me, wondering just how Corrine would react. She'd taken everything well so far, except for the hunting. Maybe she wouldn't freak. Ri-ight.

Still, I had to find out just how much she hated me. "I think I'll wait for them," I told Alaster.

"I'll go back to the house." He gave me a reassuring smile. "Everything will turn out in the end, Eliza. Have faith in that."

I nodded but didn't reply. I didn't want to remind him that fate had a tendency to fuck with my life so I kept my mouth shut and started to pace as he walked toward the house.

It seemed like forever before I heard them coming down the path. I stopped and looked at them as they came into sight, just looked and wondered how much I'd lost here tonight.

Then Corrine came over and hugged me. It surprised me more than anything she'd ever done in her life. I hugged her back while looking questioningly over her shoulder at Mac. What had he said to her? I couldn't tell anything from his face, he was partially turned away from us lighting a cigarette.

"Are you okay?" I asked Corrine softly.

"Thank you," she said softly.

I pulled back in surprise to look at her face. I could tell she wasn't really comfortable with whatever Mac had told her, but there was love and forgiveness on her face. I ran my hands down her arms and pulled her close for another hug. This was certainly not what I expected; I couldn't believe she didn't hate me.

"Now you don't have to live in those ratty apartments anymore," she told me.

"There is nothing wrong with my apartment," I said, grateful she couldn't see the tears that filled my eyes. It was almost too much that she wanted to take care of me, even after learning the truth.

"Yes there is," she said firmly, "and you're not living in another place like it again."

"What are you, my mother?" I asked gruffly, trying to cover my emotions.

"I'm not that mean," she told me bluntly.

I closed my eyes and pulled away from her, turning so she couldn't see the pain on my face. I had tried my best with Corrine, given her everything I ever had to give to another person, and for her to say that cut me to the bone. I wanted to scream, to cry, to kill something. Anything to stop from feeling the pain that sliced through my heart.

She grabbed my hand and turned me back to her. "I'll take care of you better than she ever would have," she said softly.

I breathed a silent sigh of relief that she'd been talking about Kate's mothering methods, not mine. I let her hug me again, grateful that she hadn't meant what I'd thought she meant.

"I don't need you to take care of me," I protested. I've had years of practice taking care of myself.

"It's my turn," she insisted.

I didn't agree, but I knew it was pointless to argue with her. I'd be much better off letting her think I agreed and doing my own thing than trying to convince her I could take care of myself.

She smiled and changed the subject. "Did you have any plans for the evening?"

Mac looked at me like I had the answer. "Last I knew we didn't have any plans. I'm not the one in charge."

"The only thing I'd intended to do this evening was teach you to shoot," Mac said softly. "Do you feel comfortable with the gun?"

"Probably about as comfortable as I'm ever going to get," she told him.

"As I said, I pray you'll never have to use it, but knowing you have the knowledge is reassuring."

I couldn't believe she was talking this calmly about it, but maybe it was an after effect of him telling her to 'calm down'.

"I think we all know that this is something that I'm never going to feel totally comfortable with," she said slowly, "so lets just agree to disagree and I'll try to accommodate your desires in this."

I looked away. "Better uncomfortable than dead," I told her.

"Why are you uncomfortable with it?" Mac demanded.

"Because its not within my nature to use something like that," she replied.

"I'm not asking you to use it," he said impatiently. "I'm asking you to have the knowledge to use it."

"Well, wouldn't the knowledge of using it constitute at some point maybe having to use it?" She was getting as impatient as he was.

"If you have to use it, wouldn't you rather know how to?" he replied irritably.

She looked at him for a long moment, then dropped her eyes. "I guess, yeah."

I shook my head; she was so much like her father it was scary.

"So do you have any other plans?" she asked again

"I thought a nice long talk with Glenn would be good," I murmured, looking toward the farmhouse.

She gave me a sharp look. "I don't think that would be necessary."

I smiled a little, but didn't rise to her bait. "So we gonna stand out here all night?"

"Well, do you want to go in and hang out for a while?" The tone of her voice said that wasn't what she really wanted. "I think I'm going to go back tomorrow. What are your plans? Are you staying here?"

"For a bit," Mac told her.

"Are you going to come back to Salem?"

"Well, we have to be back by Wednesday," I reminded her.

"Oh?"

"You're, uh..." There was no way to say this except just to say it. "You're going to be postponing your visiting, aren't you?" I asked her.

She tried to look confused. "What are you talking about?"

"Don't play dumb," I told her simply. "It doesn't suit you."

"I think we all know that can't happen," she admitted sadly. "Yet."

"Just making sure that we were clear on that," I murmured.

"Oh, we're clear." I could tell she didn't like it, but at least she'd agreed to it. "Actually, I'm thinking about going home next weekend, if I get caught up enough that I can."

"Have you talked to your parents lately?" I asked.

She nodded. "I talked to them yesterday."

I smiled. "I'm sure they'll like you visiting." Corrine was very close to Gene but I knew that she loved both of them very much.

"I'm not sure I want to have that conversation," she said slowly.

"Have what conversation?" There were so many she could be talking about.

"That I know the truth conversation?"

Oh, that one.

"So don't have it," Mac told her in a hard voice.

She blinked at him in surprise. "Well we've always been straightforward with each other," she said softly. "It's just that I've always known that they adopted me and I just want to talk to them about this whole thing, you know?"

"And what will you tell them of us?" he asked.

"Well," she began, "they already know—"

"Of what we are," Mac clarified.

"I think for obvious reasons that can't come out," she told him, "but I will tell them I know that Eliza is my mother and I'll tell them that I've found out who my father is." She stopped for

a moment and looked down. "But I'm going to have to figure out exactly what I can and can't tell them because I obviously can't say 'Well, you know, dad's a blood-sucking fiend'." When she said that last bit, she looked up and smiled, obviously trying to make a joke.

Mac didn't find it funny. He gave her a hard look that helped me contain the laughter that threatened. He hadn't liked it when I'd called him that either.

"Not that I think that you're a blood-sucking fiend or anything," she said quickly. "But you know..."

"The truth of the matter," he replied, his voice cold.

"Is that you're a—"

"Blood sucking fiend," he interrupted.

"Well, I don't think you're a fiend," she said soothingly. She walked closer to him, trying to wrap him around her finger and make him forgive what she'd said. It wasn't working. "Any thoughts on what I should tell them, or shouldn't tell them?"

"That your father died before your birth," he told her.

"Which is what they think anyway," I mumbled.

"Okay." She kept looking at him like she looked at Gene when she'd done something wrong.

"You should give it up," I suggested softly. "He's almost as stubborn as you are."

"I'm not stubborn," she said hotly. "I tell you who's stubborn," she added when I laughed at her, "and it's not me."

"It's not me," Mac replied.

"Uh-huh," I murmured. "It's both of you."

"That's the pot calling the kettle black," he told me.

"I'm not stubborn," I said quickly, then added more slowly, "Just set in my ways. What are we doing?"

"We're standing here," he told me, his voice still cold, "arguing with each other."

I shot him a hard look. "And how is that different from any other night?"

He met my look with a hard one of his own. "It's not."

We stood there staring at each other in the moonlight, neither of us willing to back down. Finally Corrine cleared her throat.

"Do you want to go for a walk?"

I looked at her. "Do you have something in mind?"

"No," she said slowly.

"You're fishing toward something," Mac commented.

When she shook her head, I added, "It seems like you are."

"I'm not fishing toward anything," she protested. She threw up her hands in disgust. "Do you want to see the tricks that I've learned?"

That caught Mac's attention. "Certainly."

"I was kidding," she told him.

"I wasn't." When she just stared at him in amazement, he added, "I'll show you the trick that I've learned."

"Yeah," I said dryly. "The whole 'calm down' thing was real good."

"Calm down?" Corrine repeated softly.

"It worked, didn't it?" Mac replied in a hard voice while shooting me an even harder look. "Much better than your stand-there-and-avoid-the-situation response. Quite excellent, thank you."

I didn't like his tone. In case he'd forgotten, I'd taken care of Corrine all by myself for the last twenty years and I sure as hell didn't need him telling me how to deal with her. I was just getting ready to tell him that when Corrine spoke up.

"Now, now, children," she said sternly.

I looked away, anger still burning at the pit of my stomach.

"Do you use any forms of meditation now?" she asked Mac, trying to change the subject.

He allowed it. "Yes, a few of the basic theories outlined in 'The True Power Within'. They have the same effect."

They talked for a few minutes about meditation and some of the other things Jared was teaching her. I listened with half an ear, but the topic really didn't interest me. I mostly concentrated on calming down.

"There are a few physical differences," Mac told her when she asked how he meditated. "I have no heartbeat to calm."

"So does that make it easier? Harder?"

"A little easier," he replied. "I'm not fighting nature."

As they continued to talk, something about the tone of her voice struck me as wrong. It was like something about her training made her sad.

Mac picked up on it too. "What's wrong, dear?"

"Nothing."

He mumbled something under his breath that I didn't quite catch. "What's wrong," he said more sternly.

"Well it just sucks that I have to—" She stopped and sighed sadly. "I just wish that you had more of your memories so I could talk to you about some of this stuff. I feel closer to you than I do to Jared."

"Now that you have met my parents, I'm sure they would be more than happy to help you," he told her gently.

She glanced at the house. "Yeah, I guess you're right." Still, I could tell she wasn't satisfied with that.

I followed her glance. "Too bad Glenn is such a dick," I murmured. He'd always been a great teacher, but now I didn't want him anywhere near my daughter. From the look she gave me, she didn't want him near her either.

"Well, I guess Jared will suffice," she said finally.

"If you don't like him we can find you somebody else." Salem was full of magic users.

"It's not like he's being paid for this or anything," she said dryly. "I just wish that it were someone a little closer, someone, you know. Not that I don't trust Jared or anything else, because he's really great, but it's just odd."

"Would you prefer Siofra?" Mac asked suddenly.

"N-no," she said, surprised. "Jared is fine."

"Thank God," I murmured. I could just see that bitch teaching my daughter how to invade people's dreams. So very not what I wanted for her.

Corrine tried again to explain to Mac how she felt. "It's just with something like this you kinda want someone a little closer to you. I'm sure you wouldn't want any Tom, Dick or Harry to teach you any of your things. You'd want whoever made you to show you."

That would be Dougal. Man, I wish she hadn't brought him up.

Mac didn't seem to notice. "The way the clan is set up, every Tom, Dick and Harry does teach you," he told her.

"Oh, well that stinks." She looked down.

"Why don't we pick a different subject?" I suggested.

She raised an eyebrow at me. "There's some good trees over there for stakes."

I glanced in that direction. "Actually, ash is best for stakes and those aren't ash."

"What all did Glenn tell you of our past?" Mac asked. I was glad he brought it up again, I was anxious to know exactly what he'd said.

"Oh, God," she breathed. She shifted uncomfortably and looked toward the house. "You know, I think I hear grandmother calling—"

"No, you don't," he said sternly.

"I think I'll go—"

"Really, she's not," I added.

She sighed. "I really don't want to go into this."

"Would you rather we take it up with him?" I asked calmly. That was actually my intention, but if she wanted to tell to me first, I'd let her.

"Just leave it alone," she pleaded.

"No," Mac said firmly. "What did he tell you?"

"Just enough to make me not like him," she replied.

"Glenn has been known to not tell the whole truth," he reminded her.

She looked at her father for a long moment, then sighed. "He just said that he was involved with hunting, he went into detail about what happened with his mother."

I remembered what he'd told me once, that he'd come home to find her dead and the house in ruins. I hadn't thought of that in years.

"To a certain extent I can agree with what he was feeling at that point in his life," she continued, "but I don't think that he was justified to do the things that he did. He told me that he met Eliza and that she became involved," she looked at between the two of us, almost as if not sure Glenn had told her the truth, "but not how she became involved. He said that when you came to America, you knew each other through parents and when you guys started your relationship that you became involved. And that's about it."

Mac turned away, but I met our daughter's gaze. "Actually you know, it was the other way around," I told her.

"It was the other way around?"

"The hunting before the dating."

She looked confused, but Mac clarified. "I got involved in the hunting before I got involved with Eliza."

"Not too much before," I had to admit, "but before. Despite my protests to the contrary, but since when did he ever listen to me. He still doesn't."

"I don't think you listen to him, either," she reminded me. When I just smiled, she shook her head. "Anyway, it's done, it's just something that was going to come out eventually so don't blame him for it."

"No, it wouldn't have," Mac told her.

"Who says it would have come out eventually?" I asked at the same time.

"It should have come out eventually then," she said firmly.

I couldn't agree, but I knew better than to try and argue with her when she had that stubborn look on her face.

"Look," she told me, "this is the time to be with family, and to establish or reestablish relationships. It isn't a time to anger management anything. You can start by helping me to remember that too."

I got the hint. "So did you want to go in, or go elsewhere?"

Mac didn't wait for an answer, he just started walking. When I called his name he stopped, but he didn't turn around. I went closer to him until I could see his face, then looked back at Corrine. What was I supposed to do when he had Cormac face?

"Did you want to go in the house or elsewhere?" I asked him softly.

"Elsewhere," he replied, not looking at me.

"Okay," I said slowly, "the three of us elsewhere or Mr. Attitude elsewhere?"

He shot me a hard look. "Do as you wish."

"Jesus fucking Christ," I muttered. He didn't have to be so bloody difficult.

"I thought you didn't believe in that?" he asked sharply.

I ignored the comment. "Well, we wouldn't want to impose our presence upon you if you're in such a bad mood," I told him.

"Who said I'm in a bad mood?"

As if. "The look on your face?"

Behind him, Corrine was gesturing silently that I should be nicer to him.

"We're upsetting the child by arguing," I said softly. "Maybe we should stop our arguments until later."

"We're not arguing," he replied.

Then what the hell were we doing? "She thinks we are."

"She's arguing too then."

Whatever. "The three of us elsewhere or Mr. Attitude elsewhere?"

"Do whatever you would like to do."

Okay, that was his brick wall hitting me in the face. "How late is the bar open?"

"Midnight."

I looked at Corrine. "The bar?"

"Okay," she agreed. "Let me go get my purse."

"We probably should go in and say goodbye to the family," I told her, although it was the last thing I wanted to do. I started to follow Corrine but quickly realized that Mac was not with us. I looked over his shoulder to see him headed for the cemetery.

"Go ahead and go in," I told Corrine. "I'm just going to follow and make sure nothing jumps out and bites him."

"Do you just want to meet there?" she asked.

"Nothing's going to jump out," he called back in a hard voice. "Go."

I met Corrine's eye and gestured toward the point. She nodded and went into the house while I followed Mac at a distance, keeping far enough back that I didn't intrude on his solitude. He hesitated briefly in the cemetery, then walked on toward the point.

When we got there he sat down in his usual meditative stance and I crouched on my heels back on the trail far enough that I could just see his head over the rise in the ground. It looked like he was going to be a while, so I figured I might as well get comfortable. I kept my senses trained on the countryside around us and gave him the space he seemed to want so badly. If I had any sense I'd have gone with Corrine, but I didn't think I could face Glenn any more tonight without causing a scene.

About fifteen minutes later I heard Corrine moving down the path toward us. I stood up and walked to meet her before she could interrupt her father's brooding.

"What's going on?" she asked softly.

I shrugged. "He's not exactly share guy this evening. You want to know, you ask him, cause I've pissed him off enough tonight."

She looked down the path toward him. "Well, I probably have too."

"You have an advantage," I told her, smiling. "You're cute. You can go 'oh look at me, I'm cute'."

"Oh, get away," she said, laughing softly. Then she sobered. "Maybe if we just make it known we're here he'll like—"

"You think he doesn't know we're here?" I asked seriously. I knew he did.

"I don't know what to think." After a long moment, she got that stubborn expression on her face and put her hands on her hips. She looked at me like she expected me to do something, and when I didn't, she called me a chicken shit and strode off toward her father.

I watched her sit down next to him and study his pose for a few minutes. She adjusted her posture until she was mimicking him exactly. It made me want to cry.

You know, it really should have been me that died that night, not Mac. They both would have been so much better off. They should have had those years to be together and bond like a normal family. Mac would have found a way to keep Corrine with him, for the two of them to be a family during all those lost years. Why had the Powers That Be chosen me to take care of her? I'd screwed everything up so badly.

Eventually she tried to get his attention and I hoped that she could get through to him. I wasn't even sure how to try anymore. For real now, I'd already given him everything I had to give, I didn't know what else he expected of me.

I watched her try different ways to bring him out of the state he was in, but nothing seemed to work. She even dropped a pebble into his hands, but he still didn't pay her any attention. When she leaned forward to talk to him and he still didn't respond, she turned and looked at me, a little panicked.

"Eliza," she called back to me, "he's not paying attention."

I shook my head, knowing I couldn't let her keep trying. As I started to walk toward them, she reached for his shoulder, but he grabbed her arm before she could touch him. He didn't hold her wrist for long before dropping it and putting his hand back in his lap.

"Eliza, he's being a butthead," Corrine complained softly.

"You know it's possible, Corrine," I said softly as I reached them, "that he wants to be left alone."

"Hey," she protested, "I was leaving him alone."

"So maybe you and I should just go," I suggested. I had no idea what was causing his mood, but if he wanted to be left alone, so be it.

"Fine," she agreed.

"Maybe he can catch up with us when he's done with his brooding." I held my hand out to her and she took it. I pulled her to her feet and we started walking toward the house.

"Did you get the keys to the car again?" I asked softly. "'Cause you know I can't drive the bike."

Mac's voice called out from behind us. "Is Bobby at the house?"

We both stopped and turned around, but it was Corrine who answered. "Why?"

"Is Bobby at the house?" he asked more slowly.

"Why?" she repeated.

"Is Cara at the house?"

She glanced at me, but I had no idea what he was going for. "No, Cara's not at the house," she told him.

"Is Bobby at the house?"

"Why?"

"Just answer the question," he told her.

"I believe he is," she admitted, "but I don't know how long he'll be there."

"It would be interesting to know if you are Kinfolk or not," he said softly.

"Why?"

"Why not?"

"Angus was Garou," I reminded him.

"How much Kinfolk she is," he clarified. "How much of the delirium she's immune to."

I stared at him in surprise, but he was still looking down. "What, you want him to shift into Crinos in front of her and see if she freaks?"

"Yes."

"I don't think so," I said harshly.

"Why?"

How could he ask that? "Don't you think she's had enough handed to her tonight?" I demanded.

"She's leaving tomorrow," he reminded me.

"And there's no Garou in Salem?"

"None that we're friends with," he replied.

He had a point, the Garou in Salem didn't think too highly of me. Wouldn't I prefer her first contact with a big furry werewolf to be a friendly one? I looked at Corrine. "Do you want to see a werewolf get all big and furry?"

She glanced between the two of us, obviously not quite sure if she wanted to see that or not.

"We could also take the opportunity to show her the different forms," Mac added.

"I don't care," she said finally.

I shook my head and looked at Mac. "She goes from not knowing anything about werewolves to two weeks later she knows everything? This is fun." As in the real not kind.

"Knowledge is power," he reminded me.

Whatever, but he wasn't making me do this by myself. "Are you thinking that you're going to sit here and we're going to go up to him and say 'Oh, Bobby, by the way, can you shift into big furry form so we can see if Corrine freaks out?'"

"No," he said, rising to his feet. "I'll go with."

I opened my mouth to say that at least something got him out of his brooding fit, but it probably wasn't a good idea so I closed it again.

"What?" Mac asked.

"Nothing," I told him. "If we're going to go, lets go." I turned and walked toward the house and they followed. When we reached the cemetery, I let them go ahead and followed a little behind. I really wasn't looking forward to going back to the house.

GOOD-BYES

DARKNESS ON THE EDGE
SHADOWS WHERE I STAND
THESE DREAMS — HEART

When we reached the patio, Glenn, Bobby and Alaster were sitting outside drinking brandy and smoking cigars. Corrine walked over to her grandfather and kissed him on the cheek.

"I thought you were leaving," he murmured as he accepted the kiss.

"We were," she told him with a glance at Mac, "but now they're thinking that I should see someone, you know, grr."

"Shift," Mac clarified.

"He's thinking," I corrected her. "Not they, he."

Bobby looked at Mac in surprise. "Why?"

"To see what level the effects of the delirium are in her," he explained. When Bobby looked at Corrine, Mac added, "And show her the different forms as well so she can recognize them."

"And I'm the example," the shapeshifter drawled.

"Yes."

Bobby looked at Alaster, but when the elder mage only shrugged he looked at Glenn. It didn't seem to matter to Glenn either because he shrugged too.

"Do you want to do it here?" Bobby asked.

"Wherever you're comfortable," Mac told him.

"Well, I don't think your mother would appreciate a Crinos werewolf on her patio," he told Mac.

"Wouldn't be a first time," he replied with a smile.

"It would be a first time for me," Bobby told him. He gestured toward the barn, then followed after them. I didn't.

Alaster offered me a glass of tea, and I accepted. Glenn offered to get it for me then left to do so without waiting for a response. I knew he didn't want to be left alone with me. A few minutes later he came back and handed me a tall glass. As I took a sip, I looked at him meaningfully.

He sighed and sat down. *What is it, Eliza?* I heard in my mind.

I hid a smile behind the tea. *Seems you've been sharing some things with Corrine that you shouldn't have been,* I drawled back.

He shifted uncomfortably in his chair. If Alaster hadn't been looking toward the barn, I'm sure he would have seen it.

I didn't say anything that you shouldn't have already told her, he replied defensively.

You're begging for some deep pain, I told him sharply. *I don't have a problem taking you on if that's what I have to do to keep you away from her.*

He smiled. *You could try, Eliza,* he whispered in my mind. *I've learned a few tricks in the last twenty years, I'm sure I could handle whatever you threw my way.*

At that moment, I saw the others coming back from the barn.

Why don't we give it a go? I suggested. *See who ends up on top?*

I don't think the Brennan's would like that, he warned me.

No, we wouldn't, a new voice interjected.

Glenn and I both looked at Alaster in surprise.

"That's enough of that," he told us. "It's not polite to mindspeak in company."

"I'm sorry," I said honestly. "I just don't appreciate Glenn telling Corrine things about our past that we weren't necessarily planning on sharing."

Glenn shook his head and had the grace to look ashamed. "I'm sorry," he told me. "It's just that Corrine is stubborn and intuitive and I didn't actually mean to tell her."

Right at that moment, the others joined us. Corrine shot me a sharp look, but I just met her gaze calmly. I had never promised her that I wouldn't say anything to Glenn.

"Did everything go well?" Alaster asked.

"Just fine," she told him. "Shouldn't it have?"

Mac looked down at his arm and in the dim light I could see four crescent marks that were exactly the size of her fingernails. Apparently it hadn't gone quite as well as Corrine was telling us.

"Not that it shouldn't have gone well, I was just curious," Alaster replied. "I wanted to make sure you didn't 'freak out'."

"No," Bobby assured him almost proudly. "She did just fine."

Alaster looked at his son. "Are you planning on sticking around for a while or taking off?"

"I think Corrine could probably use a drink," he murmured.

"Well we have drinks here."

"Grandfather, no offense but I don't think I can handle what you drink," she said softly.

"Actually we thought a trip to the bar would be a good thing," I added.

Alaster looked vaguely disappointed, but Glenn was obviously relieved. Bobby didn't seem to care either way.

When Corrine and her grandfather went inside for the car keys, Mac looked at me.

"Continue," he said softly.

I raised my eyebrows at him. "What makes you think I started anything?"

He didn't say anything, but the look he gave me said volumes.

"You know I didn't want to threaten his life with Alaster out here," I told him, "but now that he's gone...." I shot Glenn a look that told him exactly what I wanted to do with him. It wasn't good.

"I told you I didn't actually mean to tell her," he said, watching me carefully.

"It doesn't matter what you meant to do," I growled. "What matters is what you did, so maybe you should just stay away from her. For good."

Corrine and Alaster came outside and from the corner of my eye I saw that she knew what I'd been doing.

"Let's go," she said impatiently.

"Sure," I replied, smiling smugly. "I've said everything I needed to say."

"Do you want to ride with me?" she asked.

I glanced at Mac. "It depends on if Mr. Attitude is taking passengers." By the look he shot me, he wasn't. Then again, I really didn't want to get a lecture from Corrine about talking to Glenn. "You know, I think I'll ride with him."

"Chicken shit," she murmured as she walked past me toward the car.

"No," I said loud enough for Mac to hear, "it's that whole avoidance thing."

We got to the bike and I put my helmet on before climbing on behind Mac. I felt really tense, the way I feel when I need a really good fight to clear my mind. Not argument either, I'm talking brawl. I knew I wasn't going to get it tonight so I took deep breaths to try and calm down.

The bar was kind of crowded, it being Friday, but somehow we managed to get that corner booth Mac was so fond of. Corrine had her drink and I listened to her and Mac talk about magic and other things Jared had been teaching her. I drank my coffee and stayed quiet mostly. I don't do magic, there was nothing for me to add.

At midnight we finished what was left in our glasses and Mac dropped some money on the table before we went outside.

"It's getting late," I said as we walked toward the vehicles. "Are you going back to the house?"

"Yeah, I need to get my stuff around," she told me.

"When will you be leaving?" Mac asked.

"I was thinking after lunch." She looked down, almost as if she felt guilty for leaving.

"So then I won't be seeing you again." His voice sounded sad.

"Not until you come back to Salem," she said in a small voice.

"And theoretically you'll be seeing her there," I reminded him.

"Theoretically," he agreed.

"So when exactly are you coming back?" Corrine asked.

"By Wednesday sunup." At least, that was when I had to be back by. Charity would be pissed if I were so much as a minute late.

When Corrine looked at Mac, he smiled. "Sometime Tuesday."

"Although you probably won't see me for a few days after we get back," I told her. "I'll be busy catching up."

She looked confused. "With what?"

I almost said killing things, but figured I'd better not go there. "Stuff at St. Stephens," I said vaguely.

"Okay. I guess I'll see you when I see you." She stepped forward into my arms and I hugged her tightly.

"Be careful," I whispered in her ear.

"You too," she replied.

"Keep the gun on you." As much as I hated to think she might need it, I had to agree that it was possible.

"Oh yeah," she replied.

I let her go and looked at Mac. They were watching each other as if they weren't sure what to do. I rolled my eyes and gestured to Corrine that she should hug her father.

She took a few steps closer to him. "I guess I'll see you later," she said softly.

He took her into his arms. "Be careful," he told her.

"You too," she said as she kissed his cheek.

We watch her get into the car in silence. As much as I knew I'd miss her, I was glad she was leaving Galway. I didn't like the thought of Glenn being close enough to upset or influence her anymore than he already had.

"Where would you like to go?" Mac asked as we got on the bike.

Like it mattered. "I don't care."

"We have six hours," he reminded me.

"Yeah, we have six hours and it's your town," I shot back. "Also, I can go places in the daytime so at night we should probably go places that you want to go."

"There is no place I want to go," he said simply.

"Then we just go no place." I was damned tired of having this conversation tonight. Couldn't he just pick somewhere and take me there?

"So be it."

He drove back to the room and I followed him upstairs. When he sat down on the davenport, I went to the kitchenette area and started making something to eat.

"Do you want some?" I asked him just to be polite. I knew he'd say no.

"No thank you."

"Didn't think so," I muttered. "Thought I'd ask."

"So where are you going to be staying when we get back to town?" he asked just as I was taking my first bite of the sandwich.

I chewed for a moment, then swallowed. "Just a wild stab," I drawled, "but, St. Stephen's?"

"When you're not at St. Stephen's," he said sharply.

"The apartment." Where else was I supposed to stay, with him? He'd have to ask me first, I wasn't going to beg to be with him.

"Your apartment is no longer in livable condition," he reminded me almost smugly.

"That has something to do with someone walking through the door." Mac, to be exact.

"I moved the door first," he corrected.

"And the table, and the chair," I added. "Actually, I have a line on another apartment."

"Oh?" Somehow he didn't really seem surprised.

"Yeah." When he looked at me expectantly, I said, "Yeah, another apartment. It's over toward the park that Samantha lives by, not that you know where Samantha lives."

"I've been to a couple of parks in Salem," he told me.

"It's Mack Park," I said, smiling at the irony. "The house is a few blocks away on Deveraux."

"Is that park still being frequented by covens?"

How did he know they used that park? "Yeah."

"It was when I came to town two years ago as well," he added.

Something about that nagged the edges of my memory, something about that park and a vamp around that time. "So you were in town two years ago?"

"Yes."

"In that park," I said slowly.

"Yes."

Now I remembered Aislynn telling me about the attack on a coven of witches that had been stopped by a vamp. They'd only gotten one of the women before he'd shown himself, and since a vamp is more dangerous to the general population than witches are, the hunters had gone after him. He'd lost them pretty quickly, and by the time they'd gone back to the park the witches were gone. Aislynn had told me that the Inquisitor who'd killed the witch was found murdered a few nights later. That vamp was high on the wanted list at St. Stephen's.

I put two and two together and came up with four. "Oh," I murmured, "so you're the one."

"Yes," he replied, his voice hard. He always had believed in blood for blood, and I had to admit I agreed with what he'd done.

"Anyway," I said, pushing the past away, "it's not that far from the park. Where will you be staying when you get back to Salem?"

"I'm not sure," he said. "I have a few places I could stay."

"If knowledge is power," I said dryly, only half joking, "you must not want me to have any."

"Have you told me everything about your life?" he demanded.

I stared at him speechless, stunned by the venom in his voice.

"Then don't expect me to tell you everything," he said sternly.

It hadn't occurred to me before how badly the knife of the past could cut both ways. I guess I was keeping power from him too, wasn't I? But short of launching into a tale of my past, there was nothing I could say or do to change things. Unfortunately, that was something I wasn't quite ready to do yet. I looked away and finished my sandwich in silence while Mac opened a book and began studying.

I figured it was best to leave him alone, so I turned the TV on low volume and watched old movies until the television stations went off the air at three o'clock. Not wanting to interrupt his studying, I left the room go down the hall for a shower.

By the time I got back to the room and changed into one of Mac's tee shirts to sleep in, I felt a little better. I came out of the bedroom to find Mac on the phone. Did I listen? You bet your sweet ass I did. Sometimes that was the only way I ever learned anything about his life.

"Nina's Designs," a young female voice answered.

"Yes, is Nina Rodriguez in?" Mac asked softly.

"I'm sorry, she's not," the girl told him. "She should be in around seven thirty."

He noticed me in the doorway, and I looked away, going to the refrigerator for a soda.

"Ah, just tell her that Mac called," he said slowly. "I'll be—"

Before I could wonder about him using that name with Nina, the girl warmed up fast and hard.

"Oh, Cormac, she'll be glad to hear from you," she exclaimed.

"Yes," he replied dryly. I didn't look at him, but I could tell he was watching me. "Tell her I'll be back in LA for a night or two on Sunday."

"Oh, she'll be so glad to see you," the girl gushed. He must be a real regular there for her to be so familiar with him. "I know she's been missing you, she's been talking about you, it will be such fun. Do you know what time so I can tell her when you'll be here? Or should I have her call you back?"

"I'll be busy for the remainder of the evening," he told her. "Sometime in the evening on Sunday I'll find her."

"Are you sure?" she asked. "Because I can—"

He cut her off almost gently. "I'm sure. Thank you."

"You're welcome," she replied. "And it will be good to see you again, Cormac."

"Good night," he said with a slight chuckle before he hung up.

When he turned back to his book, I watched him carefully, wondering what he wasn't telling me about this vampire in LA. Finally I couldn't take it any more. "And how's Nina?" I asked trying to keep my voice carefully controlled.

"She wasn't in, as I'm sure you heard," he said. When he glanced up, I tried to shoot for that innocent look again, but he didn't buy it. "Save it," he told me harshly.

"Why would I listen?" I demanded. I couldn't stop myself, and yes, it was jealousy rearing its ugly head. "Is this the personal reason you're going to LA? Could this be the reason you don't want me to go?"

"I have some personal effects to take care of," he told me coldly, "matters to wrap up."

Yeah, I'd just bet he did. Personal effects with this Nina. I turned away and took a long drink of the soda to keep my mouth occupied.

"I have no need of my other bike," he said, his voice a little more warm. "And I still have some personal effects at Aurora's shop."

"Aurora," I murmured. Another woman he was 'close' to.

"Aurora's the witch," he reminded me. "A Dreamspeaker in LA."

I decided not to dignify that with a response. I'd already said enough tonight to reveal the green-eyed monster that lived inside of me, I wasn't going to say anything else. Instead, I turned the television on again and started flipping channels.

"You're not going to find anything," he told me.

I glanced at him, but he was reading again. "Well, you know some stations come on real early." I could say that, but there really wasn't anything on. "Apparently not in Ireland, though. You think they'd have cable."

"There is the radio," he suggested.

"Somehow I don't think they're going to be playing my kind of music in Galway Ireland," I muttered. I was in the mood for hard rock, Metallica or Godsmack, something with a driving beat I could lose myself in.

After a while I found a station that played something similar, but it didn't hold my attention for long. I needed something physical to quiet my mind, something that would tire me out otherwise I wasn't going to sleep tonight. Let's see, what could I do that was physical that would exhaust me? My eyes were drawn to Mac and I knew what I wanted to do.

"So are you going to read that all night?" I asked him.

He turned the page. "Do you have something else in mind?"

If I didn't, would I be asking? "Well you did say something earlier that we just really couldn't follow up on at the time."

"And that was?"

"Well," I said slowly, "you said 'bite me'."

"Yes," he agreed, "but you can't, or won't, or both."

"I didn't say anything about drinking blood," I said, wincing at the idea of me drinking his vitae. "It's the biting portion."

"What fun would it be to bite and not drink?" Surprise was heavy in his voice.

"For you or for me?" I murmured under my breath.

He heard me. "Either."

"For you it probably wouldn't be any fun at all," I admitted. "For me I guess it would depend on the circumstances we were in."

"Biting leads to other things," he reminded me. "Like biting back."

I smiled. "And that's bad because...?"

He glanced up at last. "If I feed from you one more time I can find you anywhere."

I'd never heard of that, but I suppose it was possible. "Do you anticipate me running any time soon?"

"You've done it before," he reminded me before turning back to his book.

"Not from you." Kate was the only one I'd ever run from and with her in a dungeon there was no need to run anymore.

"Just letting you know," he drawled. There must have been something very interesting in that book 'cause he just kept reading it.

"It's such a shame you're not interested," I murmured.

"And why is that?" he asked, sounding more bored than anything.

"We could have had some fun this evening, other than arguing." I acted like I'd said something wrong and added, "I'm sorry, discussing."

"I've had fun."

Yeah, sure he had. "You know the making up is usually the funner part."

"We haven't fought," he told me.

"Would you like to fight?" I asked dryly. "Cause we could...."

"Do we need to?"

Since I thought we already had, "No, I'm just ready to move on to the making up part."

He ignored me, just sat there reading. Well I wasn't going to beg, now was I? I could take the hint. Just when I was ready to give up and go to bed alone, he closed the book and looked at me like he expected me to say something.

"What, do I have to slit my wrist and hold it out to you?" I asked dryly. God, I was sorry I'd even brought it up. It was wicked obvious that I was the only one who looked forward to our lovemaking, even though he seemed to like it enough once we got started.

He looked as if he was really considering it. "No," he said finally. "I'm fully capable of doing that."

"Slitting my wrist and holding it out to you?"

"If you want to," he replied.

"I really don't think so." The last time I'd slit my wrist Kate had saved my life. I really, really wished I hadn't brought it up. "Look, I'm going to bed. If you want to join me, fine. If not, whatever."

I got up to leave the room, but he caught me in the doorway. I looked up at him and he smiled down at me.

"You make it too easy, luv," he said softly just before he kissed me.

Rising on my toes to meet him I ran my hands around his shoulders. Finally, an outlet for everything that had been frustrating me tonight. He seemed to feel the same way I did and it wasn't very long before we ended up in bed together.

Somewhere during our lovemaking I can remember his teeth sinking into my neck and me nipping at his shoulder, but my blood was the only one shared. Surprisingly enough, his fangs in my throat didn't freak me out. Near dawn I fell asleep before he did, tired but more than content.

I got up around three and went jogging. It felt good to be using my muscles and made me feel like I wouldn't be completely useless when I got back to St. Stephen's. By the time Mac got up I had showered and was ready to go back out to the farm one last time for dinner.

It was a lot quieter with Corrine gone, a little more friendly even though Siofra hardly spoke to me. Apparently her husband and Bobby had left sometime during the day too, and I hoped that Glenn remembered my warning and stayed the hell away from my daughter.

We stayed longer that night than any of the others, Mac's parent's seemed reluctant to see him go. He went with his father up to the cemetery one last time, and since I thought he needed the chance to be alone with Alaster, I stayed with the women. It was strained, but not as bad as I thought it would be. Close to midnight, Mac finally told them we had to leave and we said our good-byes.

I wasn't sorry to say goodbye to Galway. The bike ride to the airport was a quiet one. I snuggled up against Mac's back and relaxed, trusting him to guide the bike and letting my mind wander. I remembered when we used to climb on his bike and just go, how we both enjoyed the sun on our faces.

Jax was waiting for us looking healthier and more tanned than I'd ever seen him. With Mac's help he quickly loaded the bike while I carried our stuff inside. Mac was quiet on the plane, almost too quiet. He started reading almost right away and I left him to it. I found a pile of movies to watch and slept a little. It was a long flight.

I didn't know what to expect when we got to LA, but when I asked Mac he just told me that I'd have free run while we were there, like that told me anything. He also said we'd be leaving late Monday night to return to Salem.

For a little while I thought about trying to pull him out of his book, but he seemed a little depressed so I thought better of it. If he was hungry, there was blood in the fridge, and if he wanted something a little warmer all he had to do was ask. He didn't, and some time before the sun caught up to us we went to bed, falling asleep wrapped in each other's arms.

PERSONAL MATTERS

YOU'RE BREAKING ME IN
AND THIS IS HOW WE WILL END
WITH YOU AND ME BENT
BENT — MATCHBOX TWENTY

LA was okay, if you like big crowds, loud noises and air you could hardly breathe. I didn't. Jax seemed to know where everything was, so I let him pick the restaurant and the stores we shopped at. While we were out, I happened to notice a shop on Rodeo drive called Designs by Nina. I took note of where it was, but I didn't ask Jax to stop there. I didn't want Mac to think I was checking up on his 'friend', so I pretended I hadn't seen the place. We got back to the plane just after the sun went down.

"I'm sorry we didn't get back a little earlier," Jax told me as we walked inside. "I should have allowed more time for traffic."

"No big," I told him. "We're close enough to sundown. I'm just gonna go change." As I turned toward the back of the plane, I saw Mac coming out of the bedroom dressed in his Cormac best.

"Going out?" he asked softly.

I stopped and looked at him, surprised. "Are you planning on staying on the plane all night?"

"No, I'm going," he assured me. "I have things to do."

"You didn't want me to go with?"

"Hence the personal matters?" he replied calmly. He was in full Cormac mode and I knew there was no arguing with him and I rolled my eyes at his stubbornness. "Don't give me that," he warned me.

What was he gonna do, bite me? We both knew I'd like that too much. It took all I had to keep my face blank and shrug as if it didn't matter. "I still need to go change," I told him coldly.

"As you wish," he drawled as I walked toward the back of the plane.

I closed the door softly and leaned against it, waiting for him to come after me. Instead I heard him follow Jax outside. It took some effort to blink away my tears, but somehow I managed to turn to my suitcase and pull out a change of clothes.

I was a little surprised to hear the bike start before I was completely changed. He wasn't even going to say goodbye. Looked like the personal business was more important than a hug and a kiss, didn't it? Well, I'd be damned if I was going to sit here and wait for him to come back. I'd spent enough time in the last two weeks sitting around waiting for him.

In no time I was dressed in my hunting clothes. Not that I planned on hunting, I just wanted to blend into the dark half of the city. As I was walking away from the plane, I heard Jax calling after me so I stopped and waited for him to catch up.

"Where are going?" he asked.

"Elsewhere," I said abruptly. I didn't need his permission to leave and Mac had told me I had free run while we were in town.

Jax looked me up and down once, I'm sure noting where my weapons were. "You won't do anything stupid?"

I laughed softly; he obviously thought I was headed after Mac to take out my frustrations on him. "I'm just out for a night on the town," I told him. "Mac doesn't want me around so I'm going to find something else to do."

He looked like he didn't quite believe me, but what could he do? "Okay," he said finally. "Do you need a ride somewhere?"

I shook my head. "I can take care of myself," I told him, smiling to take the sting out of my words. "Thanks, though."

"You got plenty of money?"

"Yeah." I still had the remains of the money Mac had given me when we'd left Salem almost two weeks ago. "Don't worry about me."

He shrugged. "Have a good time."

"Yeah. Don't wait up." I turned and walked toward the main terminal, but I felt his eyes on me until I turned a corner out of sight.

When I reached the main terminal, a bus pulled up that was heading downtown so I got on it. There were a wide variety of people on board, everything from businessmen to hookers. There was even a vamp near the back of the bus, but I stayed away from him and he didn't seem to notice me. It was a quiet ride.

I got off the bus down the street from Nina's shop and looked quickly around. I didn't feel any vamps nearby, but there were a lot of people around. Sometimes this many people got in the way of my Spider-sense.

Walking slowly and letting the crowd flow around me, I moved down the block toward Nina's shop. I put my feelers out for vamps, but I couldn't feel any. Keeping my eye out for Mac or the woman he'd shown me the picture of, I went into the store.

I don't know what I expected, but I was a little disappointed. There were three valley girls working and they didn't seem too interested at me once they'd taken a good look at my clothes. I felt like a fool for going in there, but since there I was, I took a look around.

The shop was trendy, with clothes I'm sure Corrine would have liked a lot. There was jewelry there too, and I found a pair of earrings that I knew she'd like. I winced when I saw the price tag, but I supposed it could have been worse. I paid for the earrings and got out of there.

I walked the streets for a little while, but nothing held my interest. I decided to go back to the plane and call Corrine. At least there were movies on board that I could watch until Mac got back.

As soon as I got back to the plane I called my daughter and we talked for a few minutes about school and her friend Samantha. She told me she'd finally met Samantha's cousin Brian, and that he was very nice. They'd even had lunch together. I was glad to hear that she was making new friends, maybe even meeting a decent guy to date. Still, I couldn't hide from her that something was up.

"What's wrong?" she demanded.

"Nothing," I told her. "Just um—"

"Don't lie."

I hadn't really planned on it. "I'll explain when I get home," I said softly.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah." I would be anyway, eventually. "Just not what I expected, I guess."

"Has Mac done something?" she asked.

That made me laugh. "No."

"Or has Mac not done something," she amended.

That was closer to the truth. "Well, he's had his personal business to take care of."

"What's that supposed to mean?" She sounded puzzled, which made two of us.

"You tell me and we'll both know," I said dryly. "Apparently I don't need to know. He doesn't want me to go with." I took a deep breath to control my tears. "We're supposed to leave before sunup on Tuesday, so I'll be back in town just after sundown."

"Okay." I could tell she was confused, but I really didn't have any explanations for her.

"Um, can I ask a favor?" I asked hesitantly.

"Yeah."

"Will you meet me at the airport?" I didn't think it was a good idea to ride back into town with Mac, for a couple of reasons.

"Of course."

"N-not where Mac's plane will come in," I told her quickly, "maybe the Northwest terminal or something? I think Jax would drop me off there." I didn't know if I could stand watching Mac be warm with Corrine when he was so cold to me. Or worse, seeing him cold to her too.

"Yeah, that's fine," she assured me.

I breathed a sigh of relief. "Okay. Six-thirty or quarter to seven? You could take me to my new apartment."

"Your new apartment?"

"Well, I couldn't go back to the old one, could I?" I asked, smiling a little.

"Where is the new apartment?"

"Well, do you remember telling me about the house Brian bought? The one he's renting out rooms from? There's an upstairs apartment. Gillian tells me it's fairly nice."

"You haven't seen it?" There was something like relief in her voice, but I couldn't figure out why.

"No, she's made the arrangements for me while I was gone," I told her. "But you'll see it when you drop me off, give it the once over."

A few minutes later we said our good-byes and I hung up the phone. I tried to watch a movie, but it really didn't interest me. Finally I gave up and went for a long hot shower, which helped a little. I went to bed but I didn't have the peaceful rest I'd hoped for. I dreamed.

I was in our apartment in Baltimore and saw Dougal grab Mac from behind. I screamed, but they didn't hear me. Then Dougal's face started to change. I watched while he shifted from the vamp I loathed to the man I loved, only it wasn't Mac who stood there, it was Cormac, teeth bared.

Shocked, I looked at the person he held in front of him. It was Corrine, held in the same bruising grip that Dougal had once held Mac in. I screamed again, but that didn't stop Cormac from leaning down and sinking his fangs into her neck.

Somehow I was able to break away from the bitch that held me. Somehow I made it across the room and to my daughter's side just as the vampire who was my lover dropped her to the floor, dead.

I felt the vamp on the fringes of my dream and it woke me instantly. I shook off the remains of my dream and listened as Mac opened the door to the bedroom and peeked in, then went back to the main cabin.

For a few minutes I just laid there remembering the nightmare I'd had. I knew deep down that Mac would never hurt Corrine, ever. Why was I having nightmares that he would? It didn't really matter, did it? And I wasn't going to spend what was left of our second to last night together moping in the bedroom. Finally I got up and joined him, running a hand through my hair to smooth it down a little.

"How was your evening?" I asked politely, still put off by his earlier need to be alone.

"Uneventful," he replied, putting his phone away. "I took care of what business I had to."

When it was clear he wasn't going to say anything else, I went back into the galley for something to drink. I grabbed a bottle of juice, went back to the main cabin, and sat down with a magazine.

"I spoke with Brenda again," Mac said after a few minutes. "It seems Kate is not cooperating real well with them."

I shot him a wry look. "Did you think she would?"

"No. What was Linda's last name?"

Where in hell had that question come from? "As far as I know it was Gentry," I said, trying to hide my surprise. "I don't know what her real name was if that wasn't it. Why?"

"They found out of another servant of Kate, female," he replied slowly.

"Besides Linda?" Damn, she'd been a busy Tremere.

"They don't know who it is," he said, watching me carefully. "I gave them the name, but they have been unable to find her."

"They don't know who or when?"

"No, they haven't had any leads."

That could make it hard to find her. "Any information at all where this person was last?"

"Charleston."

That was it, just the one word, but it shook me to the core. He was looking at me expectantly but I dropped my eyes to hide how much that had affected me.

"What do you know?" he asked softly.

I tried to make my voice strong, but it didn't come out that way. "They don't know when in Charleston?"

"No."

I knew I had to tell him something, I just wasn't sure how much. That Kate had most probably killed the guy I'd been living with, sleeping with? That Charleston was the reason I stopped doing drugs? That it was the reason I'd spent the next ten years running from Kate?

What came out was much less than any of that. "Kate was in Charleston thirty years ago," I told him reluctantly without looking up. "But I didn't see Linda there."

"Is there anything you can tell me that might be helpful?" he asked, his voice cold.

"Like I said, I didn't see her there," I told him softly, "and I only saw Kate there once. I left town a couple of days after I saw her." Abruptly I realized that I had a stake in my hands but I didn't know when I'd pulled it.

"That doesn't give me too much of a lead," he replied.

It really didn't. "I don't know if she was able to follow my trail after Charleston, although I guess she had to follow it somewhat to find me in Baltimore." I noticed an irregularity on one side of the stake and pulled my knife to fix it. Concentrating on that helped me keep my emotions in check.

"Where did Jax get off to?" he asked a few minutes later.

"I didn't ask," I said coolly. "He said he had places to go of a personal nature, I believe he said." I couldn't resist the dig, but I regretted it when I heard Mac chuckle. I ignored it and put the stake I'd been working on away only to pull another and check that one for balance.

"Have you spoken with Corrine?"

"Yeah," I said, starting to relax a little. "I talked to her earlier this afternoon."

"Has she returned home safely?"

I glanced up, but he was looking down at one of his ever-present books. "Yes," it told him. "And she's visited Samantha. Apparently those two are becoming fast friends."

"Well, they have a lot in common," he drawled.

"Apparently they have something else in common," I told him. "Corrine likes Samantha's cousin."

"Oh?" Finally a little interest in his voice.

"Yeah. I've seen the guy before," I continued, "he runs the Borders in town, but I don't know him that well. I guess I don't know him, we don't run in the same circles. He's not anything weird." Well, at least nothing supernatural.

"Corrine wasn't either until a few weeks ago," he reminded me.

"Good point," I agreed with a smile. "And it turns out that he owns the house that has the apartment Gillian found for me."

"Ah, the irony is staggering," he said dryly.

"Funny how that works, isn't it?" I hid a sigh, then asked, "So did you get everything taken care of?"

"Yes." He gestured toward some boxes that were lying near the door.

"So what time are we leaving tomorrow?" I asked. "Or are we leaving today?"

"At the end of tomorrow evening," he replied, turning back to his book.

"And we're heading straight for Salem?"

"Yes, or rather Boston."

"So will I be spending another evening alone?" I asked, my voice carefully controlled.

"You've had free run to do whatever you like," he reminded me.

I nodded slowly. "I'll take that as a yes."

"I have a few Kindred matters to take care of," he added.

I didn't bother to remind him that he'd taken me with him for all the other Kindred matters he'd had on this trip. "I suppose I should start getting back on a normal schedule," I said softly, hoping he would protest.

He didn't. "It would make the transition easier."

"Probably." That wasn't exactly what I wanted to hear, but I really had no choice but to deal with it. I didn't wait very much longer before I excused myself and went to bed. And as

much as I wanted him to come with me, I wasn't going to ask. After his coldness tonight, he probably would have said no and I've never been one to handle rejection well.

Sleep didn't come easy and when it did come it wasn't good.

I was standing in the parking lot behind St. Stephens, looking up at the cross on the roof of the building. I could feel something wrong with the night, but I didn't know what it was. The moon shone brightly from behind the cross and I raised my hand to shield my eyes.

The howl of a wolf cut through the night like a knife. I turned toward the sound and saw Cormac standing a few feet away. He smiled, but it was a cold smile. Dougal stood behind his left shoulder and at his feet lay a silver wolf, its dead eye gleaming dully in the moonlight. I opened my mouth to scream but I had no breath.

I felt the crossbow in my hand and without thinking I raised and fired it. One of the vamps fell, I couldn't tell which. Another smooth motion sent a stake toward the other vamp and it too dropped to the ground.

"Kill them," I heard Gerome whisper in my ear. He was standing next to me, the crossbow bolt still sticking out of his chest. "Kill both of them. Avenge the wolf."

Pulling my knife, I walked toward the bodies on the ground. The blade sliced through Dougal's neck like it was butter and to my amazement, the wolf stirred. I turned to Cormac and twisted his head for better access to his neck. I slid the blade across the skin and—

The bed moved with Mac's weight and it brought me instantly awake. It took me a minute to push the nightmare to the back of my mind and by the time I did, he was lying on his back with the blankets pulled to his waist.

How could I even dream about killing him? Dougal I could understand, but Mac? I couldn't stand to be so far away from him so I rolled closer. I almost expected him to move away, but he shifted to put his arm around me and I snuggled in against his shoulder. The touch of his skin seemed to chase away the remnants of my nightmare and it didn't take very long for me to fall asleep. This time there were no dreams to haunt me.

TINSEL TOWN

GIVE A TOAST TO THE SUN, DRINK WITH THE STARS
GET THROWN IN THE MIX AND TOSSED OUT OF BARS
COWBOY - KID ROCK

It was close to noon when I woke up. I crawled out of bed and into the kitchen to brew myself a pot of coffee. Then I went jogging for a little while to stretch my muscles. After a quick shower, I sat in the bedroom for a while and watched Mac sleep.

We only had more night together and he planned on spending it elsewhere. It wasn't fair, Gaia only knew when I'd be able to see him again once we got back to Salem. I had to wonder what was so important about this personal business of his and what there was about me that he didn't trust with it. I was sure it had something to do with Nina.

I tried to shrug off my jealousy. Yeah, he'd said he hadn't had sex in the last twenty years, but that didn't mean he hadn't gone and fallen in love. Just because I hadn't didn't mean he hadn't. For real now, he hadn't even remembered me until less than three weeks ago.

When I realized my cheeks were wet, I angrily dashed my tears away. I refused to do this to myself. If Mac had found someone else, who was I to get in the way? It only made me think I was right to believe that he only remembered his love for me, he didn't really love me now. How could he? Look at what I was, what I'd turned out to be.

I stood and grabbed an extra stake from my suitcase, shoving it down the inside of my left boot. Almost as an afterthought I took one more and put it up my right sleeve. There were a lot of vamps in this town and I didn't want to be caught off guard.

The sun would be down soon, and I didn't want to be there when Mac got up. If I stuck around, I didn't think I would let him leave without begging him to take me with him. I walked out of the plane quietly so that Jax wouldn't hear me from the cockpit. I made my way to some airport equipment that was parked about a hundred feet from the plane and found a comfortable spot just out of sight.

It was only a few minutes after sundown when Mac came off the plane and got on his bike. I watched every move he made, committing it to memory. That's all I'd have when we got back to Salem, memories. When he was gone I strode in the opposite direction. There was a bus that went through the terminal at six thirty and I wanted to be on it.

Once I hit downtown, I found some greasy spoon to eat at. Nothing fancy, just a burger, fries and a lot of coffee. After I was done, I hit the streets and walked for hours, not sure what I was looking for or even if I was looking for anything at all.

As I walked down the street I heard something that caught my interest. There it was, the driving beat I'd been looking for the last few nights. I followed the sound and ended up outside of a biker bar that had very heavy music streaming from the open door. A large bouncer checked me up and down but never asked for ID before letting me in.

My Spider-sense kicked in right about the time I cleared the doorway. There were at least three vamps here, maybe more. Not exactly what I wanted, but I could play nice as long as they kept their distance.

I made my way toward the speakers, which brought me closer to the dance floor. The place was rough, which I'd expected, but somehow it almost seemed like home. Almost, that was, until I looked across the room and saw a vamp sitting alone watching me.

He looked tall and sad, those were my first impressions of him. He was holding a beer but looking up at me speculatively. I nodded politely and turned away. A little while later I felt a vamp come closer and I stiffened.

"Don't worry," the sad vamp said from behind me. "I won't bite."

I turned and looked him over. "You're teeth aren't in the right position for that," I told him dryly, earning a surprised look and a grin.

"You know what I am?" He gave me a close look. "Does that mean you're interested?"

Somehow the thought of anyone but Mac feeding from me left me cold. "Sorry, I got all the fangs I need."

He shrugged. "Who is he? Maybe I know him."

"How do you know it's a he?" I asked.

"The look in your eyes," he told me. "Only someone you love can bring you that far down, and you don't seem like the type to like girls."

I shook my head and smiled. "I don't think you know him," I replied. "I don't think you're in the same... family." This guy looked more Gangrel, or Brujah than Tremere.

"I don't remember seeing you around here, are you from LA?" he asked. "Plan on being in town long?"

"No, I'm from the East Coast," I told him. "We're leaving before dawn to go back."

Something about that made him seem even sadder. "I think my girl's out there too," he said morosely.

"Really?" I wondered who his girl was and if she were Kindred. He must have seen the questions on my face.

"She's from a different family too," he said softly. "The magic one. She left me for the love of her life." He took a long drink from the beer in his hand. "Guess he finally got over being ugly."

Just then I felt a vamp coming toward me fast from my left and I stepped back without looking. I put a hand on one of the stakes at the small of my back and looked at the Kindred who'd tried to blindside me.

The vampire looked a little surprised that I'd moved, but so did the one I'd been talking to. The new guy shot me a questioning look, then turned to the other one.

"Hey, Luke," he drawled aggressively, something of a New York accent in his voice. "Whatcha got, a happy meal?"

I rolled my eyes at the vamp's lack of manners and waited to see what this Luke would do.

"Somebody else's happy meal, Jack," he told the newcomer. "Why don't you find someone else to bite?"

Jack moved closer to me and I palmed the stake. If he got any closer I was going to nail him where he stood.

"But she smells so good," Jack drawled. "I bet she tastes even better."

"Back off, Jack," I growled. I really didn't want to start anything, this not being my city. "I didn't come here for this."

Suddenly someone grabbed my right hand, the one holding the stake. It wasn't a vamp or I'd have felt it come that close to me, plus the skin was too warm.

"Get your hand off me," I told the guy, my voice calm and cold.

"Let the girl go," Luke said harshly. "We don't treat other people's property this way."

"I'll let her go when I'm through," Jack told him.

I looked at Luke and he met my eye briefly. "No stakes," he told me softly before glancing toward the dude who held my right hand. I got the hint.

Two seconds later Luke and I moved at the same time. He hit Jack hard enough to make him go flying, and I twisted away from the puppy and kicked him in the knee. I heard the joint pop and he went down. I tucked the stake into my pocket and punched him in the jaw. He didn't get back up.

A couple of Jack's friends decided to join the party, but they'd apparently been drinking so it wasn't a big deal. It actually felt good to be fighting. At St. Stephen's I worked out every day, but it had been a while since my last work out in Nashville.

The only hit I took was a sucker punch. I'd just finished a sidekick to get Jack away from Luke when some vamp chick came out of nowhere. I felt her coming, but I didn't move fast enough. She only hit me once, but by the time I was done with her she was sorry she had.

Finally the bouncers stepped in and we were all asked to leave, politely but firmly. They sent Luke and I out first mostly because he seemed to know all of the bouncers.

"That was fun," he told me, grinning. "Thanks."

I grinned back. "Yeah, it was good. If you decide to go east for your girl, look me up. I'll be in Salem." I wouldn't mind another bar fight like this one, it really had been fun.

He seemed a little surprised, almost like he was going to say something, then he smiled sadly. "Don't let your... friend bring you down too much, babe." He turned and walked off into the night.

I moved off in the opposite direction before Jack and his buddies came out and found me standing on the sidewalk. The fight had been good, but I'd had more than enough of LA. I caught a bus and headed back to the airport. After I took a quick shower, I healed the bruise on my face so Mac wouldn't know I'd been fighting. The chick must have hit me harder than I'd figured 'cause it took more than I would have thought to get rid of the marks on my face. Using that much blood made me tired, so I went into the bedroom and laid down. I knew I'd feel better after I slept.

Once again the feel of Mac coming in woke me up. I didn't bother to wait, I got up and went into the kitchen for some juice. He was talking to Brenda again, and they were discussing Linda. It sounded like they were having a hard time locating her.

I sighed. I could keep my mouth shut and not deal with it, or I could offer some information that might help. And of course Mac's comment about me not telling him everything about my past echoed through my mind.

"Would it help if you knew what she looked like?" I called softly.

"It might," he told me.

"It might?" Brenda asked on the other end of the line, and he told her to hold on a second.

I walked into the living room to see him looking at me expectantly. I gave him a brief rundown of what I remembered Linda looking like. It was a little hard considering I'd spent over thirty years trying to forget every second that I'd ever spent with the woman. He passed the information on to Brenda, then asked if I had to report to the chantry.

"As far as I know," she told him, "her duty is to return to the Society."

"Could you have a ghoul bring the things I've asked for out to the plane?"

"Not a problem," she replied, but I had to wonder what things he was asking about.

"While you have her on the phone can you ask her if they've assigned a new contact person?" That was something I hadn't thought about before.

He held the phone out to me, but I made no move to take it. I knew I'd been a serious bitch to Brenda, and I'd feel wicked stupid being nice to her now. I looked evenly at Mac and repeated what I'd just said.

He put the phone back to his ear. "Eliza wants to know if they've assigned a new contact person and if so, whom."

"I don't know," she said softly.

He glanced over at me. "Well, perhaps she will have to report in to the chantry."

"As far as I can say at this point, she knows how to contact me and I can let Elvira know that she's wondering."

"Very well," he agreed. After saying good night, he hung up the phone.

I didn't want to go right back to bed, but I didn't want to sit in the cabin and stare at Mac either so I went into the kitchen to find something to eat.

"What did you do that was fun and exciting today?" Mac asked as I pulled an apple from a bowl on the counter.

"I wouldn't call it fun and exciting," I murmured, walking back into the main cabin.

"Boring and mundane?"

"How about different and weird?" I sat down and rubbed the apple on my shirt. "I went shopping and checked out Hollywood and bought some magazines." And got in a bar fight.

"Did you get cast in any movie parts?"

Yeah, ri-ight. "I don't think my contract would allow that to happen." It would be damned hard hunting for the Society while starring in a movie.

"This is LA," he reminded me.

"Yeah, but people don't just get picked up off the street and cast for parts," I told him.

"Yes they do," he corrected me.

I shrugged and picked up a magazine. "Well I didn't." I took a bite of the apple and started reading. He took the hint and pulled out a book of his own.

We sat there in silence, him studying and me pretending to read. Did I mention that I don't have the patience for reading? I like to learn things hands-on style, hearing how someone else did something never really did it for me.

Anyway, eventually I got tired of the silence. I excused myself and went back to the bedroom where I laid down on the bed and stared at the ceiling. I tried to sleep, but I couldn't. I hated the tenseness between Mac and me, but I didn't know how to fix it. I'd done everything I could, given him the chance he'd asked for, but it felt like we were further apart now than we had been when we left Salem almost two weeks ago.

When he came to bed near dawn I pretended to be asleep but I'm sure he knew the difference. He curled up against my back and I was finally able to close my eyes. When the sun came up, we both slept.

ENDINGS

WILD, WILD IS THE WIND
THAT BLOWS THROUGH MY HEART TONIGHT
THAT TEARS US APART
WILD IS THE WIND - BON JOVI

I woke up when I felt the plane land in Boston. I laid there for a long time knowing that it would be days or weeks even before I'd feel Mac's arms around me again. Finally I got up and gathered some clothes together. I took a shower and let the hot water warm me up. As much as I liked sleeping with Mac, his body was cold.

It felt strange dressing in my old clothes. Funny how two weeks of dressing a little nicer had changed what I was used to wearing. It took me a few minutes to find the chain I used to keep the rings on, but I finally did. I didn't want to take the rings off, but I knew I had to. If Mac was able to renegotiate the contract, I'd be able to wear them again. If not, well I'd rather not think about that.

I packed all my things and sat them by the door. Jax came in and asked if there were anything I needed before the sun came down, so I was able to ask him for a ride to the terminal after Mac got up. He agreed and I helped him pack Mac's things in the trunk of a car that was parked outside. By the time we were done, the sun was going down so I went inside to wait for Mac.

I was sitting on the edge of the couch, but I stood up when he came into the main cabin. "I got a ride coming for me," I told him before he could say anything. "It'll be better if we don't go back together."

"As you wish," he replied softly.

I winced. "I wouldn't quite say it's 'as I wish', but I think it would be wicked obvious if I pulled into town with a...." Christ, let's call a spade a spade, shall we? "A vampire."

"If I dropped you off at St. Stephen's, yes," he murmured. "It would be rather interesting, I'm sure."

That was putting it mildly. "To say the least."

He led the way out the door and I picked up my crossbow case, the only luggage that Jax hadn't loaded into the car already. When we were on the ground, I looked at him sadly.

"I'll see ya when I see ya," I said softly, not sure what else to say.

He looked at Jax who was standing next to the car. "Has someone brought the items I've requested?"

"Yes, sir," he replied. He walked over quickly and handed two small items to Mac who turned them over and looked at something on the backs of whatever they were.

He held one out to me and I could see it was a pager. I took it slowly; he hadn't said anything to me about doing this and I wasn't sure I liked the idea.

"It's so I can get a hold of you," he told me.

"What, am I your beck and call girl?" I asked dryly. When he reached to take back the pager, I slid it in the pocket of my jacket. "It's just a bit of a surprise," I said quickly. Turned out I liked the idea of him being able to get a hold of me if he needed to.

"And there is a cell phone," he said, handing me the other item, "so you can call me back."

I looked at the phone. "How am I gonna explain this at St. Stephen's?"

"Hiding the phone will be a lot easier than a knife or a stake or a gun," he told me.

That made me smile. "You think?"

"Wear a jacket," he suggested.

I looked down at the jacket I was wearing, that I almost always wore because it covered my weapons. "I am wearing a jacket."

"Keep the beeper set on vibrate," he instructed. "You really don't want it going off when you're stalking something."

I had to agree. "That would not be good." I looked toward the terminal then back at Mac. I wanted to touch him just once more, but he looked so unapproachable. "Well, I have to go meet my ride. Jax is going to drop me over there," I told him.

He held out his arms and when I walked into them it was like coming home. His arms felt so good around me, I never wanted him to let go. I held him tight and wished things could be different, that we could go back to Salem together and not worry about Charity or St. Stephens, or Radek. Still, this was how life was. Some things you have to live with, no matter how hard it is. I held back my tears and kept my face as calm as possible, refusing to let him see me cry.

"Call and let me know what your new phone number at the apartment is," he said softly as he pulled away.

"As soon as I know it," I promised. "Will you be getting a new number out here or are you going to keep the LA number?"

"I'll be getting a new number, but you can get a hold of me through Brenda if the old number doesn't work."

I couldn't read his eyes. "Okay. Well, you'll know how to get a hold of me," I said awkwardly.

"Yes."

I turned to go, then looked back at him. "I'm ah, I'm going to be busy for the next week I'm sure," I told him. I felt quite sure he knew what I meant. "If I don't get right back with you don't flip out."

He nodded. "Good night, be safe." His eyes got real warm and for a moment he was my Mac again. "Love you," he said softly.

"I love you," I told him. I stepped closer for a quick kiss, then turned and walked to Jax's car. I got in and a moment later Jax did too. In the side mirror of the car I watched Mac pull out his cell phone as Jax started the car and pulled away.

"Are you all right?" the ghoul asked softly a few minutes later.

"Five by five," I replied in a voice that sounded hollow even to my own ears. I concentrated on looking out of the window at the airplanes we were driving past.

He didn't say anything else until he pulled up beside Corrine's truck. "Here you go," he told me.

I turned to him. "Jax," I said hesitantly. I wasn't quite sure how to say what I needed to say to him, I just knew it had to be done. "I appreciate the help you've been on this trip."

He shrugged and smiled. "I just did my job."

"No," I protested. I'm not real good at the sharing parts of life. "You did more than that. You helped me deal with some things that have been bothering me for a while. Thank you."

He seemed to understand. "I'm glad I could help, Eliza."

I nodded. "I'll see ya around." I got out of the car and grabbed my luggage out of the back seat before I walked over to where Corrine was standing near the front of her truck.

I tried to keep the emotions off my face but I knew she could tell something was wrong. I put down my suitcase and tried to smile. "Hi."

She crossed her arms and gave me a sharp look. I ignored it and looked over my shoulder to make sure Jax was gone.

"What's going on?" she demanded.

I blinked back the tears. "Let's just go," I told her. I wanted to be gone from the airport before I broke down completely.

Corrine grabbed the suitcase and put in back the back of the truck and I sat the carry on bag and the crossbow in beside it. We got into the truck and she took off toward the express way and home. I could feel her looking at me from the corner of her eyes, but I stared out the window and didn't look at her.

"Did you have any problems getting home?" I asked her, my voice sounding like it was a million miles away even to me.

"No, not at all," she told me. "Did you?"

"I'm here." The problem hadn't been getting here, it had been leaving Mac.

She drove quietly for a little while which kind of surprised me. I thought she'd dig into me right away and just waiting for it was making me uneasy.

"You're going to have to spill it sooner or later," she said at last.

That was all it took. I put my head in my hands and bit back the sobs that ripped through me. How was I supposed to go back to my life? How was I supposed to kill without the anger I'd fed on for so many years it had become a part of me? How was I supposed to go on night after night without Mac there with me?

To my surprise, Corrine pulled off onto the next exit and not real carefully. "What's going on here?" she asked harshly as she pulled into a McDonald's parking lot.

By that time I'd gotten a little control over myself. "I-I don't know, I'm tired I guess."

She slammed on the brakes to bring the truck to a stop and turned it off before turning to face me. I looked down, wishing more than anything that I could pull a stake and feel the wood beneath my fingers.

"Eliza, what the hell happened?" she demanded softly.

"Nothing." It was the truth, after all. Nothing had happened.

"What do you mean, nothing?"

I shrugged. "We went to LA and he went his way, I went mine. We met back on the plane and that was pretty much it."

She shook her head. "I don't understand what's going on here."

"You and me both," I murmured with a sigh. "I don't know, I guess it's not important."

"Well of course it's important, you're upset."

I looked at her calmly. "I'll get over it."

"I'll kick his ass," she muttered darkly. "Vampire or not, I will kick his ass."

"Corrine Mackenzie," I warned her, "I'm sure it's just me, and there's no need for you to concern him with this."

"Oh, sure," she said sarcastically, "like there was no need to concern Glenn after I told you everything was fine, now was there?"

She had to throw that in my face didn't she? Then again she wouldn't be Mac's daughter if she didn't. "Corrine, you will not say anything to Mac about this."

"I'll say nothing to Mac like you said nothing to Glenn, how's that?"

It sucked. "I really didn't say that much to Glenn."

"I'm sure you didn't." Her tone didn't match her words.

"I didn't," I told her. "Honestly, I swear, I didn't say a word to him while you were out by the barn." I did think quite a lot in his general direction, but no spoken word passed my lips toward him.

"What happened between Glenn and I is between the two of us," she said firmly.

"And whatever happened with Mac and I is between the two of us," I agreed.

"And hey, you respected that, didn't you?"

Of course I didn't. Corrine is my daughter, I'll do anything to protect her from getting hurt, anything. This was an argument I knew I couldn't win. "Look, whatever. While we're here, why don't we get something to eat and you can just drop me off at the apartment."

She cursed softly and glanced at her watch.

"What?" I asked.

"Nothing."

No, there was something. "Are you in a hurry to be someplace?"

"No," she shot back. "Are you?"

"Well, I have until dawn," I reminded her.

"Good."

"Good." Between Mac and our daughter, I'd had enough dancing around for one night. I opened the door and strode quickly toward the restaurant. Corrine followed a little more slowly.

We got our food and sat down to eat, with Corrine glancing at her watch every couple of minutes. Finally I couldn't take it anymore.

"Do you have someplace to be?" I knew she had a life, I was by no means her entire world.

"Why do you ask?"

Duh. "Because you keep looking at your watch."

"I wanna know what time it is," she replied defensively.

"Two minutes later than the last time you looked," I told her.

She shook her wrist. "It's been giving me some problems."

"So buy a new one."

That earned me a surprised look. "Since when are you little miss frivolous money spender?"

"It's your money, spend it frivolously." I didn't work for the Society so she could have a damned watch that didn't work. Which reminded me of the earrings I bought, and I pulled the bag out of my pocket. "Speaking of money, I picked these up for you when I was in LA. I thought you'd like them."

She gave me a funny look, but she took the bag. "These are really cute," she said when she took out the earrings.

I smiled. "I'm glad you like them. It's from a really trendy shop in LA."

"They're really cute," she said again. "Thank you. You didn't have to, though."

"I thought you'd like them." I could tell that she really did.

"I do, very much."

"It gives you something from LA, too," I told her. She'd never been there before.

"So, what was the big secrecy involved with LA?" she said slowly, putting the earrings back in the bag.

"You know, I never did find out," I said, trying to keep my voice level. "It was a personal matter that I apparently didn't need to know about."

"Well, maybe he was tying up loose ends to come back here," she suggested.

I looked down, irritated that she would defend him, even though I liked that she did. "Yeah, whatever." It obviously wasn't any of my business.

She leaned forward so that she could see my face. "Yeah, a little green around the edges there," she murmured.

"What?" I looked up in surprise at how easily she'd read me. "He's a grown man, and I don't own him."

She just laughed. "Nice try."

"Are you done? 'Cause I'm done," I told her impatiently.

She glanced at her watch and agreed. We cleaned off our table and went out to the truck. As we pulled out, I saw a car following us. I took a closer look and realized that it was one of the house ghouls from the Chantry in Salem. I was pretty sure they were following Corrine, watching out for the mysterious ghoul of Kate's. They followed us to my new apartment but continued on when we pulled in the drive.

THE APARTMENT

THERE ARE TIMES WHEN I LOOK ABOVE AND BEYOND
THERE ARE TIMES WHEN I FEEL YOUR LOVE AROUND ME BABY
TOGETHER AGAIN — JANET JACKSON

She parked behind the house and we got out of the truck. I reached into the back for my bags, but she told me to leave them for the moment. When I asked why, she pulled a bandana from her pocket and ordered me to turn around.

I took a careful look around, but there was nothing hiding in the shadows. Obediently I turned around and let her tie the bandana around my eyes.

"I didn't realize you were into bondage fun," I drawled softly.

"You are so goofy," she replied as she led me toward the building.

I didn't like the idea of being blindfolded, and especially not after dark. Still, my Spider-sense wasn't tingling so I went willingly up the stairs. I heard a key go into the lock and the door open a moment later.

"Why are you acting like you've been here before?" I asked, wondering how she'd gotten the key.

"I don't know," she told me, her voice a little too innocent. "You can't see anything, can you?"

"Corrine," I asked softly, "what did you do?"

She led me inside but didn't answer. "There's a couple of steps up here," she said as she led me up them

"You realize I don't like surprises," I reminded her.

"Do not take that blindfold off," she ordered. She left me in the center of the room while she went to move something, then she came back and led me further into the apartment. "Are you ready?"

"I think so." As ready as I was going to be, anyway.

She took off the blindfold and I stood and stared at what she'd done to my apartment.

There was a dark green love seat against the wall to my left with maroon throw pillows and a low wooden table in front of it. In the corner next to it was a plush maroon beanbag, new of course. A low bookshelf was under the window across from where we stood, and next to that was a small writing table that held a cordless phone and a digital answering machine. On the wall to my right was a small entertainment center that held a high-tech television on top and a VCR beneath it. Everything was obviously new.

"You didn't have anything established so I had the phone hooked up with your old number," she said softly.

"You know, Gillian didn't tell me this was a furnished apartment," I murmured when I could finally talk again.

"Oh, well, you know," she mumbled.

"Corrine—"

"And in here," she said quickly, pulling me back into the kitchen, "there's plates and glasses."

The kitchen was small, but then again so was everything in the apartment which was fine with me. It wasn't like I was going to spend that much time in it. A set of canisters sat on the

counter next to a new toaster. When I opened a cupboard, new dishes shone back at me in tones of green and brown.

"And oh, you've got to see the bedroom," she told me, pulling me to a small room off the kitchen. "The bedroom is so cute."

The bed was too large for the room, but since the room was so small I think any bed would have been. I liked the plaid flannel blanket that covered it, at least I'd have something to keep me warm during the cold New England winter ahead. I could smell new wood, so I figured the built in drawers in the wall had been installed yesterday or today.

I wondered what I could do to cover the window that wouldn't look wicked obvious from the outside. Of course it occurred to me that if Mac wasn't interested in continuing our relationship, I wouldn't have to worry about it.

"You shouldn't have," I told her softly. "You really shouldn't have."

She ignored me and walked over to the kitchen window. "Oh, and look at the view from here."

I laughed and let her have her way. Doing this for me made her happy and that's what I wanted most for her, wasn't it? I'd told her she should be spending her money, although I hadn't really meant that she should spend it on me.

She showed me everything she'd bought and told me that she wasn't sure how much food to buy because she knew I'd hardly ever be there. The freezer was full of frozen meals and the pantry stuffed with canned goods.

When she was done, I stood and looked at her for a long moment. She moved a little uncomfortably, like she thought I was going to yell at her for doing this.

"I love you," I told her. "Thank you."

That must have been the right thing to say because she gave me a radiant smile. I hugged her and knew she was worth every minute of every one of those years I'd worked for the Tremere.

Finally she pulled away. "So where's your van?"

I laughed. "It's not my van."

She seemed surprised. "It's not?"

"No, do you really think I would choose to drive that piece of shit?" The look on her face told me she did. "I don't have a car," I told her.

"Do you need to go anywhere?" she asked me. "Do you need anything?"

I smiled. "Well, considering I have all the food and everything I need here, no, I just need to make it to St. Stephen's in the morning but I can do that on foot."

"Are you sure? I can pick you up," she offered.

"No," I said, suddenly serious. "I really don't want you to go anywhere near St. Stephen's." I didn't want them to know anything about her.

She nodded. "Okay. So are we still on for dinner on Sunday?"

"Well," I said slowly, "that depends on if I can get away. If I can, than yes. I'll try."

She smiled. "Okay."

We went down for my luggage and a little while later she talked me into letting her take me to the laundry mat so I could wash my clothes. I tried to tell her I wouldn't be wearing any of that stuff for a while, but she wouldn't listen. And anyway, it was good to have a little more time with her.

When we got back to the apartment she helped me put everything away, but I held off on distributing my weapons. I didn't want to scare her or anything by the number of things I planned to put around the apartment.

Corrine had brought over the box I'd left at her house but I told her I'd take care of those things later. I also pocketed the remains of the money Mac had given me, I didn't want her asking questions about it.

"So do you want to talk about it?" she asked softly as she was fixing a late snack for us.

I looked up from the table to see her watching me patiently. I shrugged and decided that honesty was the best policy, in this case, anyway. "I'm just not sure that Mac is still interested in seeing me now that we're back in town."

"Why do you think that?"

"There's this girl in LA, Nina," I told her hesitantly. "I think he went to see her when we were there and I can't help wondering what kind of relationship they have. It seems like they're close."

"There was a long time there that he didn't remember you, Eliza," she said kindly. "There's no easy way to deal with something like that and it's best you know about it now."

As opposed to never finding out about it? We could argue that point, but deep down I knew she was right. "And he seems a bit ticked that I don't like to talk about my past."

"Do you blame him?" she asked softly. "Don't you want to know about his?"

"I know we need to talk about that," I admitted. "I know he wants to know about my life, but there's some things I really don't think he needs to know about, things that have no bearing on what's going on now." When she shot me a disbelieving look, I added, "It would just upset him needlessly, I've put it behind me and there's no reason to bring them up now."

"First of all, that's you, Eliza." She sighed and took my hand. "If he loves you he'll accept you for what you are, not a candy coated version of you. You wouldn't want a relationship that's not real, would you?"

With Mac I'd take anything, but that wasn't the point. "Does he love me?" I asked her. "Or does he just remember what it was like to love me?"

It looked like that hadn't occurred to her. "I guess that's something that remains to be seen," she said slowly. "What's important is that you're honest, not only with yourself, but to him as well."

Honesty. That wasn't something I'd ever been real good at. Hiding things, now that's something I excelled at. But for real now, she was right. I did want to be honest with him, to share things I'd never shared with anyone. "I guess we just have to wait and see how this plays out."

She smiled and thankfully changed the subject. "So you were with the Society when the whole thing with Tommy went down?"

"I was."

"Did you get in trouble because you left?"

"Well," I said slowly, "I explained that there was a family emergency and they assumed that someone was killed by a werewolf and that I went to take care of the problem. I let them assume."

"Assuming is good sometimes."

"There was almost a werewolf involved." Actually, I'd gone through a number of werewolves to find out where Corrine had gone.

"Did you ever get in trouble for the time that you spent with me?" she asked.

Why the hell did she have to ask that question? So much for complete honesty. "No, I didn't get into any trouble with the Society for spending time with you."

From the look on her face, she didn't like the way I'd phrased that. "Okay, you didn't get in trouble at the Society, but what about the contract?"

Amazingly enough I met her eye without flinching. "I took care of that. So how did you meet Brian?"

She smiled. "Well, he manages Borders and normally if Samantha's in the store, but I've talked to him a few times too just in passing. For the longest time I thought that him and Samantha were together, but they're just cousins."

I breathed a sigh of relief that she'd allowed me to change the subject. "Funny how that works."

"Yeah," she agreed. "He seems like a really nice guy."

"I've seen him at Borders a few times, but I don't know him. As far as I know he doesn't have any weird connections." Of course, I'd be checking in to that in the next couple of weeks just to make sure.

"No, which is something I can't help but wonder about," she told me. "Jared and other people have made it quite known that I shouldn't talk about my life to people that aren't involved in this stuff in some way. You and Mac have connections to this underground stuff and for that reason I'm glad that Samantha is Awakening as well because we can talk about things together."

"That's good for you," I said smiling. "For both of you."

"I really, really enjoy Brian's company," she confessed. "I'm just not sure if this is something I should go into because he's not involved in that and I would have to lie about that."

"Well, Samantha is involved in that," I reminded her, "but I do have to agree that it is difficult to live a lie. I know from personal experience." Man, did I ever. "You have to do what your heart tells you. And just because you like him now doesn't mean you'll still like him when you get to know him better."

"Yeah, I'm just going to take it slow," she agreed. "You know I haven't dated anyone in a long, long time."

Not since Tommy. "It has been a while."

We talked for a while longer about guys and the Wrights before she finally said she had to get going. Wednesday was one of the two days a week she spent all day in Boston at class.

"Will you be all right?" she asked me when I walked her to the door.

"I'll be fine, luv," I told her.

She kissed my cheek and went home.

You know, before she left the apartment had seemed small. Now it felt huge and lonely. For real now, it never used to bother me to be alone. I used to think I could feel Mac with me, but now I knew it had just been my imagination.

I pulled out the box that Corrine had brought over and looked through it. The radio from my old apartment was in there and I carefully removed the back of it. Inside was a small stash of money, one I hadn't had a chance to put into Corrine's trust fund yet.

There were a couple of things I could do with the money. I could put it in the trust fund, but now that she was eighteen she got to see the statements and I knew she'd know where it came from. Spending it never occurred to me.

Mac had told me that Brenda had given him money for our trip but he'd never said anything about paying her back. I felt like I owed her and I didn't like feeling that way. Between what Mac had given me and my little stash, there was almost a thousand dollars in front of me. It seemed pretty clear to me that I had to give it to Brenda. I had no idea how much he'd gotten from her, but I knew that he didn't just have money lying around. This would go a long way toward paying it back. I put the money in my pocket and told myself I'd give it to her the first chance I had.

For a while I wandered around the apartment putting weapons where they'd be easy to get to but hard to see unless you were looking. By the time I was done it was well past one in the morning so I went to bed.

The mattress was a good one, definitely not what I was used to. The blankets were warm and fuzzy, the kind Corrine had always loved as a child. It felt good, but it didn't feel right, you know? I guess I'd just gotten too used to sleeping with Mac. It took me a long time to fall asleep.

BACK TO WORK

FEELING LIKE A FREAK ON A LEASH.
FEELING LIKE I HAVE NO RELEASE.
FREAK ON A LEASH — KORN

I woke an hour before dawn and showered quickly. I knew Mac would be winding down for the morning and I wondered where he was. It took an extreme act of will not to call him. By the time I made it to St. Stephen's the sky was bright with the promise of sunrise.

Charity was waiting on the front steps for me, her arms crossed. "I thought you weren't going to make it," she said coldly.

I met her hard stare. "I do have responsibilities," I reminded her calmly. "Did you think I'd just walk away from them?"

"How did your hunt go?" she demanded.

I smiled coolly. "Quite well. Anything interesting happen while I was gone?"

"Gerome is missing," she told me.

I looked up at her in surprise simply because I hadn't expected her to hit me with that so soon. "When?"

"Last week. He went to Boston to follow a vamp and never came back." She was watching me closely, almost as if she suspected something.

"Have you sent anyone looking for him?"

She looked at me for a long moment, then sighed. "That's your first assignment," she ordered. "Find out what happened."

Bloody ironic, wasn't it? I knew exactly what had happened to Gerome, hell I'd killed him, and here she was ordering me to find out what I already knew. I had to wonder if she didn't know how he'd died. Still, I couldn't refuse.

Aislynn was waiting for me outside of Charity's office and we took off for Boston. The last place he'd been seen wasn't too far from where I'd killed him, so we started in that neighborhood. Luckily no one had seen me or Mac that night, but apparently someone had seen the van sent to pick up Kate and Gerome's body.

The first chance I got I told Aislynn that I had to use a phone. She stepped into a pharmacy and I walked across the street to a payphone. I would have used the cell phone Mac had given me, but I thought that would have been wicked obvious. I dialed his number and waited for his voice mail to pick up.

"Mac, I know you're not up, but I'm gonna be pretty busy the next few days and I don't know when I'll get the chance to call again," I told him. I gave him the number at the apartment and the address in case he needed it.

"I have to say it was a bit of a surprise," I told him, smiling. "Corrine got to it first. You'll understand when you see it. If you want, I'll leave a key with Corrine, but I don't know when I'll be able to get back there." That was assuming he'd want to after the last few nights we'd had apart.

"Look, I-I'm sorry if I stepped on your toes in LA." God, it was hard for me to apologize. I sure as hell wasn't used to doing it. "I know you've got things goin' on that aren't any of my business, I sure haven't been share-girl myself when it comes to my past. Maybe we can talk about that when things settle down." I wanted so badly to work things out with Mac that I was

willing to tell him anything he wanted to know about my past. Well, almost anything. "Some of it, anyway, I'm not real good at that kind of thing. I—"

My voice broke and I took a deep breath to try and control it. This wasn't the time or place for what needed to be said. I saw Aislynn come out of the pharmacy and turned away before she could see my face. "I miss you," I said quickly into the phone. "I gotta go."

I hung up the phone and ran a hand across my eyes. It took a minute, but by the time Aislynn joined me I had wiped all expression from my face. We got back in the car and headed for the next dead end our leads were taking us to.

It was late Wednesday when I finally got a chance to check in with Brenda, and she told me that Elvira wanted to meet with me at Jesters. Although for the life of me I couldn't figure out why, I managed to slip out of St. Stephen's and get to the club. I said the right things to the manager and he let me upstairs into a boardroom of sorts where Elvira was waiting for me. I bowed respectfully and waited.

She was silent for a long time, studying me. I found myself unwilling to meet her eyes so I looked down at the table instead. "How was your trip?" she asked finally.

"It was... good, my prince," I said honestly, glancing up at her. And it had been, once I'd gotten over Mac's nonexistent heartbeat.

Her eyebrows shot up in surprise and it occurred to me that I'd never called her 'prince' before. "I must say that I was quite surprised to learn that you didn't stake young Cormac," she murmured thoughtfully.

I didn't know what to say so I just didn't say anything.

"In fact Jax tells me that the three of you got on quite well," she added.

"Mostly," I admitted. "Ma-Cormac and I had quite a bit to catch up on."

She smiled slightly. "So I understand."

That pissed me off. I really didn't think she could understand my relationship with Mac. Hell, I wasn't sure I understood it. Still, I kept my mouth shut and waited.

"I see that Cormac has taught you some manners," she commented. "I have to say that I'm amazed."

"How is Cormac?" I asked before I could stop myself.

"He is busy," she told me. "Clan matters."

I nodded and looked down.

"In a few weeks things will slow down and he will be allowed personal interests again," she added.

I could feel her eyes on me but I flat out refused to show her any reaction. "I'm sure he will like that, my prince."

"Will you like that?" she asked softly.

I looked at her in surprise. "As my prince has pointed out," I said as respectfully as I could manage, "my contract does not allow for personal matters."

"Is that as you wish?"

What the fuck was up with everyone being concerned about my wishes all of a sudden? "What I want doesn't matter," I told her simply with no emotion in my voice. "The contract matters. The item matters. As much as I might want to spend time with M-Cormac, it is not something that I can allow to interfere in what I know has to be done."

She nodded slowly, still watching me like a hawk. "You seem different," she said after a long time.

Once again I looked at her in surprise.

"Usually you are like a wolf in a pit," she clarified. "Hostile and aggressive every step of the way and ready to bite off any hand that extends to you whether it be to help or to harm you. Now you're like a dog that is waiting for it's master to come home."

That pissed me off all over again, I was no fucking puppy. "Look, madam," I bit out, "if you are quite through comparing me to canines, I have more than a few things to take care of. May I go?"

She laughed. "That is more like the mole I know," she told me before sobering. "Still, I have to wonder what good a tame dog will do us at St. Stephens."

"I will live up to my part of the contract," I told her, trying very hard to stay calm. I could almost hear Mac telling me to play nice. "I will not put Corrine at risk for anyone, not even Mac."

"Mac," she repeated with a knowing smile. Then she nodded to herself. "As your previous contact is... unavailable, you may call Brenda if you need to pass along any information. In a few weeks we will assign you another contact. In the meantime I believe you know how to reach Ms. Thompson?"

"I do," I replied.

"You may go," she said dismissively.

I gave her a mocking bow. "My prince," I murmured before I turned and left.

Once I got in the van I lowered my forehead to the steering wheel. As different as I felt about Kindred, nothing had really changed, had it? I was still a freak on a blood contract leash and my life still belonged to the clan. Why had I thought things would be different just because I had a change of opinion about a few blood-sucking fiends? I should have known better.

BUSINESS AND PAYBACKS

I'M SPINNING, OH I'M SPINNING
HOW QUICK THE SUN CAN DROP AWAY
BLACK — PEARL JAM

Between the hunting part of my job at St. Stephen's and the cover work in the community, I didn't have a minute to myself for several days. Mornings I worked downtown at the soup kitchen. In the afternoon, I helped out at the day care center Charity had started at the church. After dinner and every spare minute in between I spent looking for Gerome, or rather, pretending to look for Gerome. I usually rolled into bed well after midnight and was up with the sun again the next morning.

It was customary for Inquisitors to work in groups of two or more, and Charity had assigned Aislynn to work with me. Aislynn was from Salem, and I'd worked with her a few times since coming to town. Normally she was all right, but this time she stuck to my back like glue. It was almost as if she'd been ordered to watch me, and I didn't like that idea very well.

Although we got along pretty good, I didn't have any opportunities to call Corrine or Mac. At night we spent a lot of time down in Boston trying to follow leads, but everything we found led us nowhere. Which was good if you think about it. It would have been a bad thing if we'd found proof of Gerome's murderer, considering that person was me.

I thought about that a lot during the time Aislynn and I spent searching Boston. Did it bother me that I'd killed him? Yes, quite a bit actually. Yeah, it had been a reflex to shoot and yeah I'd protected Mac by killing him, but there could have been other ways to deal with him. I could have wounded him and maybe the clan could have done something with him. Hell, maybe Glenn could have done something with him.

It was pretty useless to think about it though, wasn't it? Gerome was dead and I had been the one to kill him. For real now, it was just one more sin on my soul, wasn't it? I mean, if I kept count of all the things I'd killed to keep Corrine safe I'd go insane.

I kept an eye out for an opportunity to shake Aislynn and see Brenda to give her the money. It wasn't easy, but Saturday night when Aislynn had a small family emergency I finally found an opportunity.

I'd just dropped Aislynn off and I was on my way to Brenda's house when I saw Brenda's car parked in front of Alec's Book Exchange. I drove around the block and parked behind her, then got out stood by the front of the van with my hands in my pockets. I was really glad I wouldn't be walking around with all that cash in my pocket for much longer.

I straightened when they came out, suddenly not quite sure I wanted to do this. Brenda saw me first and stopped a few feet from her car. Rafe stopped when she did and when he saw me caution swept over his face.

"Eliza," Brenda said carefully.

"Brenda," I replied politely.

She stood there staring at me almost as if she expected me to pull a stake and launch at her. I glanced at the ghoul, then back at her face.

"Can I—" Shit, this was hard. "Can I have a word with you?"

She glanced around for a moment, then nodded and handed Rafe the book she was carrying.

"Do I really want you to be alone with her?" he asked softly as he took it.

"Well she hasn't staked me yet," she replied quietly.

"That's not funny, Brenda," he told her, his voice deadly serious.

"I won't go far." She leaned up and kissed his cheek. He kissed her back, but the whole time he was watching me. I tried not to look threatening.

She walked toward me and I turned to lead her a little ways down the sidewalk. I knew she wouldn't follow me far, so I stopped just past the back of my van and turned around. All at once I just didn't know what to say.

"Have you been found out?" she asked suddenly.

"No," I told her, surprised. "Why would you say that?"

"I'm trying to figure out why you would approach me like you are," she replied.

I shook my head and pulled the money from my pocket. "Let's get this over with. Here." I held the money out to her, but she didn't take it.

"What's this for?" she demanded.

"Just-here, take it." I didn't want to have to explain, but when she crossed her arms and took a step back I knew I'd have to. "I know that you, that you gave M-Cormac money for the trip," I told her. "This is partial repayment."

"You owe me nothing," she told me.

I met her eye for the first time. "I owe you a lot," I replied honestly. More than I could ever say. If it hadn't been for Brenda, Mac and I never would have had a chance to work things out.

She seemed really surprised by my statement and her gaze made me even more uncomfortable than I'd been to begin with.

I cursed softly. "Look, I know I've been a bitch," I said reluctantly, "and I'm sorry. I-I'm seeing things a little bit differently now and I-I owe this to you. Please take it."

"You owe me nothing," she repeated. "The information that Cormac brought back is helping my sister to regain her memory. That's all I care about. Family is important and you have to do what you can for the ones you love."

What was amazing was the fact that we finally had something in common. Brenda and I both cared about someone more than ourselves. The fact that I had been classifying her entire race with Luther made me want to cry and I looked down so she wouldn't see the tears in my eyes.

"Look, I—" I swallowed past the lump in my throat and tried again. "I'm sorry. Please take it."

I felt her come closer to me, but I forced myself not to move. I thought she was going to take the money, so when she touched my shoulder I looked up in surprise.

"You owe me nothing," she said again, gently this time. "The debt is mine. For the memories of my sister I would give anything. Thank you for your help."

I blinked in confusion and finally dropped the hand that held the money. She stepped away from me and gave me a kind smile.

"Um, we're even then," I whispered. I looked at her long enough to see her nod before I shoved the money in my pocket and walked quickly to the van. I felt her watch me, but I didn't look back.

What the fuck was I supposed to do with the money now? I knew better than to try and give it to Corrine. By the time I got to my apartment I figured I'd put it away until I knew what to do with it.

I knew I was going to be busy for next few days so I left a message on Corrine's machine telling her that I was going to miss dinner the next night. Then I got myself to St. Stephen's. I had places to be, things to hunt.

Apparently I'd taken longer than expected and Austin lit into me. I didn't have the patience to listen to him so I just told him I stopped for something to eat. He didn't like it, but he bought it. I went up to the library where Evan was waiting on me and spent the next three hours trying to read some old English guy's handwriting.

That night I had another dream about Mac and Dougal and the wolf. This time Corrine was trying to protect the wolf and the vampires kept chasing her. I woke in a cold sweat and it took me a long time to get back to sleep.

When I woke up Tuesday, there was another message on my voice mail from Mac. "Eliza, watch out for my sister," his voice told me softly. "If she comes to your dreams, think of making love to me." I was surprised to hear him chuckle. "That should scare her off."

Scare her off from what? I didn't have time to worry about it, I was running late and if I didn't get moving, Austin would be pissed. He was second only to Charity in both command and temper and I didn't want to get on his bad side.

Somehow I managed to slip away long enough to hit the apartment late in the day. The only messages were from Mac, and they were the same ones he'd left on my voice mail. Hearing the message about Siofra again made me worried.

What had happened that made him think she'd be walking in my dreams again? She knew who had been involved in his embrace, hell, she knew where he was. I didn't understand why he thought she'd bug me again. Still, I'd been having nightmares. Knowing it would probably still be a few days before I could call him at night, I dialed the new number he'd left me.

"Why do you think she'd bother with my dreams, Mac? She's already found you. What's going on?" I wanted to tell him what I'd been dreaming of, but I didn't know exactly what to say and anyway there was no proof Siofra had been walking in my nightmares. The last message I'd left for him had been too long. Then the phone beeped in my ear and I knew it was too late to say anything else.

Aislynn noticed I'd been gone and stuck close to my side the rest of the day. When she wasn't there Austin was. Between the two of them I didn't have a moment to myself. I wondered exactly what the deal was but I kept my mouth shut and my mind on the job. I finally tumbled into bed around four in the morning. If I dreamed, I was too tired to remember what it was about.

When I got up Wednesday I checked the voice mail on the cell phone, not really surprised to see a message from Mac. What did surprise me was how hard his voice was. "How did you know she found me?" he demanded. "What happened?"

I would have called him back, but Evan knocked on the door of my room.

"Are you ready?" he asked when I opened the door. "Charity wants to know what you've found out about Gerome."

Swearing under my breath, I grabbed my jacket. "I'm ready." Leaving a message for Mac would have to wait until later.

Charity was pissed that Aislynn and I didn't have very much information to go on about Gerome's disappearance. She basically ordered us to stay in Boston until we could find some lead she could sink her teeth into so to Boston we went.

Rumors were flying about what happened to our friend. It was just a matter of who we wanted to believe the most. I was trying to steer Aislynn in the direction of a particularly colorful rumor when the pager Mac had given me went off and I nearly jumped out of my skin.

It took me twenty minutes to slip away to the bathroom so I could check the message. It said simply, 'What are you doing in Boston?' followed by an 'M'.

How in the world did he know where I was? I mean, he'd said he would know, but I'd only half believed him. I shook my head, knowing this wasn't the time to worry about it. Aislynn would be looking for me and I really didn't have the time to call him back.

"Where the hell have you been?" the girl asked when I stepped out of the bathroom.

I glanced behind me at the closed bathroom door; wasn't it wicked obvious? "Peeing," I told her in case she didn't figure it out.

"Let me know next time," she said sharply. "What if a vamp had been in there?"

Just because I looked ten years younger than her didn't mean I was going to take her shit. I'd been doing this for a lot longer than she could imagine. "Look, I don't need you to wipe my ass, twinkie," I told her. "You've been riding me ever since I got back, you wanna tell me why?"

"I'm just following orders," she shot back. "Don't take off again."

When she turned to go I grabbed her arm. "I'm not your fucking puppy," I growled. "I don't need your permission for anything I do, got it?"

She looked down where my fingers were digging into her skin, then back at me with a wary look in her eyes. "I got it," she whispered.

I let her go and she stepped back as if I had the plague. I hid my smile and gestured for her to lead me back to the main part of the bar where she'd found yet another rumor about Gerome's whereabouts. At least this one seemed credible.

Gerome had been assigned to keep an eye on a coven of mage-wannabe's just south of Salem. The rumor said that they had discovered him spying on them and sacrificed him to the dark gods. Aislynn seemed to accept the story and we got back to St. Stephen's just after dawn.

I talked to a few of the others about the attack I knew Charity would want us to make on the coven before going to her office. Aislynn had gotten there first and she was walking out just as I raised my hand to knock on the door.

"Aislynn tells me you disappeared on her last night," Charity said softly after congratulating me on finding out what had happened to Gerome. When she talked nice like that, it usually meant she was pissed.

Too bad, so was I. "I wasn't aware that I had to live in her pocket," I replied sharply. "Is there a reason she won't let me go to the bathroom by myself?" I was pushing things and I knew it, but I had to find out if they suspected me.

"We just want to make sure that you are staying true to the cause," she told me. "There was no need to threaten her."

"Have I ever given you a reason to doubt me?" I asked keeping my voice calm even though my heart was pounding. I knew that if she suspected me I'd have to kill her and that was something I really didn't want to do. Not that I would mind killing her so much, but it

would make it hard to stay in the Society. Cold-blooded thinking on my part? Probably. "And I didn't threaten her."

She frowned which was a good sign. "You have always been very aggressive," she admitted. "You are one of the best fighters I've seen. You have been blessed."

Yeah, I've been blessed. Okay, whatever. "That may be, it really isn't important. I do my job better than anyone here, and if you don't want me to leave, you need to get the monkey off my back."

"Why do you have such a problem staying in a group, Eliza?" she murmured thoughtfully.

"I'm not exactly a people person, Charity," I reminded her with a grim smile. "Point me at a bad guy and I'm fine, but don't ask me to be polite in a crowd."

She studied me for a long time before she finally nodded. "You're right, of course. We have no reason to doubt you. I'll tell Aislynn that she no longer has to baby-sit you."

I hid a sigh of relief. "Thank you, Charity. Now if you will excuse me, I need to get some sleep before the raid tonight."

Without waiting for an answer I left and went up to my room. I pulled out my cell phone and made a quick call to Mac, although I knew he'd be sleeping with the sun up.

"I'd have called earlier but Aislynn's keeping a real close eye on me," I told him. "How the hell did you know I was in Boston? They've got me looking into what happened to Gerome, can you believe it?" Remembering the bolt sticking out of his chest made me sigh. For a moment I wondered what had really happened to his body.

"You know, we lived in Boston when I was six or seven," I said into the phone. "We ended up checking that area out pretty thoroughly for Gerome, not that I really thought we'd find him there. If I think of anything that might help the clan find Linda I'll let you know." At the last minute I remembered his message about his sister. "I don't know what you're talking about with Siofra, I haven't heard anything from any of them."

Once again there was so much more I wanted to say, but there just wasn't time. "I wish I'd gotten away sooner," I told him softly. "I wanted to talk to you. Soon, I hope." I hung the phone up and turned it off before undressing and getting into bed for a few hours sleep.

REST

SO TIRED NOW OF PAYING MY DUES
I START OUT STRONG BUT THEN I ALWAYS LOSE
SHACKLED – VERTICAL HORIZONS

The raid didn't go as easy as we thought it would. It wasn't that there were any real magic users in the coven, there weren't. We just hadn't counted on the sheer number of them. We attacked a few hours before dawn, and I got into the fight like I always do, going from bad guy to bad guy without thought or hesitation, but somehow one got past my guard.

He came out of nowhere, you know? The first hint I had of anyone close to me was the pain I felt as his knife drove into my leg. I backhanded him and he went flying, but the knife stayed in my thigh. I staggered and almost fell, but somehow I was able to catch myself.

I pulled the knife out and the amount of blood that started flowing surprised me. He'd gotten the damn artery and if I didn't do something about it I was going to die right then and there. I quickly healed it enough to stop the bleeding and when he came at me again I threw his own knife at him. It embedded in his chest and he fell to the ground, dead.

When I turned back to look the fight was mostly over. There were sirens in the distance so I made my way very carefully to the van. Aislynn had ridden with me to the site, but she could find her own damn way home.

It was hard to concentrate on driving, but I did it. Once I got a few miles away I found a pay phone I could use from the van and called Charity to let her know that we'd gotten most of them. I lied and told her I was following one of the guys that had gotten away and she told me to chase him down.

"I'm going to take a break when I get him," I added. It was a bit of an effort to keep the pain from my voice.

"It has been a rough week, hasn't it?" she asked. "Don't take too long, I want you back here by Mass on Sunday."

"No problem," I replied. Two whole days to myself and an opportunity to see Mac, if he could get free. I couldn't have asked for more.

The wound in my leg pulsed to my heartbeat, but I knew that if I tried to heal it any more I'd pass out. For the first time in a long time I thought about the day that Linda had come at me with a knife. She'd stabbed me in the leg quite close to the spot on my thigh that was still bleeding. I'd had to stitch it closed myself even though I was only twelve. Some things never change, I was still taking care of my own wounds.

It was just after dawn when I pulled into the parking lot behind my apartment. I sat in the van for a long time before I could gather the nerve to try the stairs. As I got close to the bottom of them, I thought I heard someone behind me. When I turned, I lost my balance and would have fallen if strong hands hadn't caught me.

I stopped myself from striking out, but it was a close call. Good thing too, because it was my new landlord who held me up. I didn't think Corrine would have been too happy if I'd have staked her new boyfriend.

"Miss Dushku," he said, surprised. "What's the matter?"

"I, ah, I hurt my leg," I told him, trying to smile. "Would you mind helping me up the stairs?"

"No, not at all," he replied. He looked down and I could tell the instant he saw the blood on my jeans. "My God, you're bleeding," he exclaimed. "I'll take you to the hospital."

"Brian," I said sharply. When he looked at me, I caught his gaze and held it. "You don't see any blood on my pants."

He blinked and looked down again. "I could have sworn...."

"It's the light," I told him calmly enough. "Can you just help me upstairs?"

"Yeah, no problem." He put his arm around my waist and took most of my weight while I held on to the rail and let him half-carry me up the stairs.

After he sat me down at the table, he stepped back. "Maybe I should call Corrine," he suggested with a frown.

"No," I said quickly, meeting his eye again. "You don't think Corrine should be bothered by this."

"Not at all," he agreed easily enough.

"Thank you for your help." I tried to smile but I'm sure it looked more like a grimace than anything else. My leg hurt like a bitch.

"Any time," he replied. "I'm glad we had this chance to talk. You'll let me know if there's anything wrong with the apartment?"

Like I needed this now. "From what I can tell, everything is fine," I told him, trying hard not to clench my teeth from the pain. "I'm sure everything will be all right."

He nodded. "I'll leave you to your rest then." And he did.

I sighed in relief and leaned back against the wall with my eyes closed. I desperately needed food and a shower, but more than anything else I needed to heal. Still, I figured I'd shower first. Once I healed myself, I knew I wouldn't be strong enough to do much of anything for about twelve hours.

Pulling my knife, I slit the left leg of my jeans from waist to knee and separated the fabric so I could see the wound. It looked much worse than it was really, considering I'd already healed it a little. At least it wasn't bleeding very much now. A few quick movements of the knife cut the other pant leg from waist to ankle and I gently pulled the pants off. I threw the ruined jeans into the trashcan and limped very carefully into the bedroom.

Right away I noticed the wilted daisy on the bed. I picked it up and inhaled its faint fragrance, wishing I'd been there when Mac had come to the apartment. Had he paged me from here Wednesday night? Did he miss me half as much as I missed him? Now wasn't the time to worry about that, I had some healing to do. I grabbed the tee shirt that I'd taken from Mac's things on the plane and slowly made my way to the shower.

Twenty long minutes later I was clean again. I pulled on Mac's shirt and sat down on the couch with the daisy on the low table and the thick robe I'd found in the bathroom wrapped tight around me. I laid back and sighed deeply, relaxing for the first time since I'd gone back to St. Stephen's over a week ago.

After a few minutes I picked up the cell phone and pushed the buttons I needed to in order to check the voice mail. Sure enough, there was a message from Mac.

"I told you I would be able to find you after the third feeding," he drawled in that voice I could never resist. "We will get to talk soon enough. Have patience luv."

He sighed and his voice got serious. "Siofra paid me a rather unpleasant visit. Be careful. She nearly sold her soul to avenge me once. If she blames you for my current state as well.... Just be careful, luv."

I wondered if Siofra had dream walked or just showed up in town. If what Mac said was true about selling her soul I had to say I didn't blame her. If I'd been able to find Dougal those first few years I might just have done the same thing myself. Besides, I thought it was pretty clear that she did blame me for Mac's being Kindred.

And just when the fuck did he think 'soon enough' would be? Damn, it had been over a week since I'd seen him, talked to him. I felt almost like I had when I thought he'd died, empty and cold. And I hated that I wanted to see him more than he wanted to see me. That was what I'd been afraid of all those years ago, you know? That I'd love him so much I couldn't live without him and that he would just walk away from me without a second thought.

I pushed those thoughts aside. For real now, it didn't do me any good to think that way. I picked up the cell phone again and dialed his number.

"I know you're sleeping," I said softly, trying real hard to keep the pain from my voice, "but I probably won't be up when the sun goes down and I wanted to let you know that I'm at the apartment. If you get a chance, stop by. I'm not going anywhere." That was for damn sure. I wasn't leaving this apartment until I knew I could fight. In the shape I was in even Corrine could beat me.

And thinking of Corrine, it would probably be a good idea to call her before I zoned for the day. She wasn't home, but I left a message asking her to call me. I hoped she called and didn't just stop by; usually I love to see my daughter, but today I knew I looked like hell.

I turned on the television and found a station that played old movies. Closing my eyes, I concentrated on healing my leg. I could feel the flesh knitting and my leg jerked in pain. When it was done my leg was mostly healed but I was exhausted. I let myself drift off to sleep and hoped I felt better when I woke up.

The dream caught me off guard. I was standing on the deck of Jane's cabin looking out over the mountains of West Virginia. I had a steaming coffee cup in my hand, and Corrine was standing a few feet behind me.

"I don't know how you can do it," she said softly. "How can you stand it?"

I took a sip of the coffee, but the taste was too bitter and I spit it back into the cup. "Stand what?" I asked her.

"To watch them kill the wolves," she replied, pointing toward the ground beneath the deck where Dougal and Mac were standing, their clothes covered in blood. All around them were the bodies of wolves.

"What are they?" I whispered.

"Avatars," she told me, sounding more than a little afraid. "They want mine."

"Corrine," I said strongly, "Mac would never hurt you." I put down the coffee cup on the rail and for an instant the liquid almost looked like blood. I walked to where Corrine was standing and put my hands on her shoulders.

"I'm afraid, Eliza," she whispered.

Her face shifted a little and she looked wrong somehow. I remembered what Mac had said about Siofra dreamwalking and wondered if this was one of her tricks. Even if it wasn't, I knew I had to change the way the dream was going.

"I'll talk to him," I told her. I kissed her cheek and walked down the stairs to the left of the deck. Dougal and Mac were standing in the area in front of the house that was normally used for outdoor rituals.

They glared at me as I walked closer, but I didn't let that bother me. I'd stared down more than one vamp in my time. I made my way carefully through the bodies of the wolves until I was standing very close to Mac. He bared his teeth and growled at me.

When I smiled and lifted my hand to cup his cheek, he seemed surprised. "How can you stand it?" he asked, his voice deep and rough.

"Stand what?"

"To see me like this," he replied. "To know what I am?"

I shook my head. "I love you, Mac," I told him softly. "Nothing else matters." I stood on tiptoe and kissed him. I could feel his fangs against my lips and I ran my tongue across them. He put his arms around me and pulled me hard against his body. I ran my arms around his neck and he lifted me off the ground.

Somehow I could feel things shifting around us and when Mac finally sat me on my feet again, we were in the meadow where we'd first made love. The blood on his clothes was gone, and so were his fangs. I let him pull me down to the ground and followed the advice Mac had left on my voice mail; we made love and it was beautiful.

LETTING GO

DID YOU EVER LOSE YOUR WHOLE WORLD AND STILL HAVE NO REGRETS?
AND DID YOU EVER TELL YOURSELF YOU'D DO IT ALL AGAIN?
I DID — TRISHA YEARWOOD

When the phone rang, it pulled me from sleep instantly. It had to be the apartment phone, not the one that I'd had on my lap, didn't it? I jumped up and headed for the sound before I remembered how much blood I'd used earlier. I fell to the ground and groaned when the impact jarred my leg. The phone kept ringing and I half crawled across the room to get it.

I picked up the phone and then dropped it, cursing softly as I bent to pick it up again. "Hello?"

"Eliza?"

"Corrine," I said, recognizing her voice instantly. The sun was still up, I don't know who else it would have been calling me here.

"What's going on?"

"Oh, I dropped the damned phone," I murmured. "I'm sorry, you woke me up."

"I'm sorry, I just wanted to talk to you."

"I'm glad you called, I was just—" having a nightmare, but I wasn't about to tell her about it. "Just give me a minute, I tripped over the table and—hold on a second." I held onto the furniture and made my way across the room to the couch. I took a deep breath hoping to clear some of the weariness from my mind that threatened to overwhelm me. After a minute, I put the phone back to my ear. "I'm sorry about that."

"You sure you're okay?" she asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine," I said quickly, maybe too quickly. "So, what have you been up to? I haven't talked to you in a while."

"Just catching up," she told me. "And I went home last weekend to see mom and dad."

I leaned my head back against the love seat and closed my eyes. "How are they?"

"Just fine. I'm going out this weekend. I actually have to get with Jared tonight, we're doing a seeking."

So soon? "Are you? Where?" Somehow I managed to keep the worry out of my voice.

"Some cabin," she said. "It'll be remote so that way nobody will step into anything."

"Oh." What else was I supposed to say? Seekings were a part of being a mage and that's what she was. I wasn't stupid enough to try and convince her that she shouldn't go through it.

"It'll be perfectly safe," she tried to assure me.

Yeah, ri-ight. Mages could and did die in seekings.

"I'll even be a good girl and take my gun," she added.

"I don't think your gun will be much help for what he's got in mind," I said softly. The only thing that could help her in a seeking was her own willpower.

"Yeah, well, we'll see." She seemed to realize that I didn't like the topic so she changed it. "So what's been going on with you?"

I didn't like the new subject any better. "Oh, I've been busy."

"Is Brian downstairs working?"

"He was earlier," I told her, trying for a light tone of voice.

"Did he actually meet you?"

"Yeah, we met."

"Oh, God."

"Oh, no, it was fine," I said quickly.

"You were nice weren't you?"

"I was really nice." I'd dominated him quite nicely, I thought.

"Oh, good because you know he met Mac and thought that we were dating," she told me.

That caught me by surprise. "What?"

"Yeah," she replied. "I took Mac over there last Sunday after dinner."

"I thought he'd been in the apartment," I said as I looked at the daisy on the low table.

"And what did he think of your decorating skills?"

"Oh, he liked it. But I guess, I don't know how he thought so, but... I assured him that it wasn't the case."

"That would be funny." Actually what was funny was that I'd been asking what Mac thought about the apartment, and Corrine had told me what Brian thought.

"No it wouldn't," she said firmly.

I didn't want to be obvious, but I had to ask. "So... how is Mac?"

"Stubborn as you are," she murmured.

"I am not stubborn." When she laughed, I added softly, "I'm just set in my ways."

"Yeah, whatever."

"To an extreme amount," I admitted reluctantly.

"So, how long do you get to be away from St. Stephen's?"

"Um, actually, I've got today and tomorrow," I told her.

"That's good."

"Yeah. I've been really busy, I'm kind of tired." Really tired. "I'm going to spend most of it sleeping I think."

"I talked to Mac about renegotiating the contract," she said suddenly.

"Oh?"

"Yeah, he said that he's just waiting for the right opportunity to broach the subject."

That wasn't what I wanted to hear, but it was the best I could hope for. I'm sure he had other things to do than worry about my contract. "That's probably wise."

"No," she said firmly, "tell me how you really feel."

How did I really feel? I ran a hand over my eyes and told her the honest truth. "I'm tired, Corrine." Tired of lying and killing and hunting. Tired of not having a moment in my life when I didn't have to worry about the contract. Tired of everything, tired to the bone.

"Do you want me to come over?" she asked softly.

I did, very much so, but I really didn't want her to see me in the shape I was in. I knew I'd be all right in a few days and I didn't want to worry her for nothing. "No, I need my sleep. I'll feel better after I get some rest."

"What have you been doing?"

"I don't think you want to know," I warned her.

"Okay, enough said," she agreed quickly. "All right, well, look. You get some rest and maybe we can—ah, God, I can't. Damn it. You're going to have to get some time off next week if you can."

"Well, I'd like to," I told her. It was so much easier said than done. "You know, I'm wide awake now, I don't want to go back to sleep." I wanted to put off dreaming as long as possible so I asked the first thing I could think of. "What did you and Mac talk about?"

"Eliza," she protested, "you're tired, you need to get some sleep."

"I'll be sleeping after we get off the phone," I said quickly. "I've slept for five hours already." God, had it been that long? It was almost noon.

"It was nothing big," she told me. "We just talked."

"About?"

"You mostly," she admitted.

"Why does that not make me feel better?" And why was I not surprised?

"I don't know." I could hear her sigh on the other end of the line. "Actually I kind of yelled at him."

"For what?"

"For being stubborn." She laughed a little before getting serious again. "Are you ready for your yelling at?"

Which made me laugh. "I suppose."

"I can't believe that I have to take you two by the hand to do this," she muttered.

I had no idea what she was talking about. "Do what?"

"You do love him, don't you?" Oh, she was definitely Mac's daughter. Blunt and straight to the point.

"Yeah, I would think that it would be about obvious." I hadn't staked him, had I? Hell, I'd slept with him and he was a vampire for crying out loud.

"Well obviously it's not obvious because—" She stopped and I could almost see her trying to collect her thoughts. "I don't know what's obvious and what's not obvious. One of you guys are going to have to stop being so goddamned stubborn."

"In what way?" I asked suspiciously. No matter what she said, there was no way I was going to break the contract.

"You're going to have to start opening up to him a little bit more if you expect him to open up to you," she said firmly.

I was glad this wasn't about the contract, but she wasn't telling me anything I didn't already know. "I know that."

"One of you is going to have to do it," she told me, "and whoever it is will be the better person for it."

I sighed. I really didn't need this lecture, I'd figured this one out all by myself. "I know that we need to talk about things. I know we do, it's just a matter of getting with him." It was damned hard to arrange a meeting when I had no time to myself. "I-I left a message on his voice mail this morning to let him know I'd be here, so, hopefully he'll stop by tonight."

"Yeah?" She almost sounded surprised.

"Hopefully. If he stops by, maybe we can talk about it." If not, maybe he didn't want to work things out. "In the meantime, there's not a whole lot I can do with him not being here and me being at St. Stephen's for like, ever."

"Yeah, I know," she said softly. "It sucks."

"Gotta do what you gotta do, you know?" And what I had to do was protect Corrine, no matter what. It was time for me to change the subject. "What did Jared tell you about what was going to happen this weekend?"

"Well, he brought me up to speed fully," she told me. "It's not going to be a good thing, but I have to do it."

"Yeah, I know." I knew from living with mages that seekings were necessary, and I dreaded her going through one. They could be very dangerous, but they had to be endured.

"So have you been to one with somebody?" she asked.

Something like that. "Once upon a time Glenn thought that I was a candidate. He thought wrong." Way wrong.

"Oh."

"Just um—" What was I supposed to say to her? I didn't want her to go through with the seeking, but I knew she had to. "Be careful," I said finally.

"Oh, I will," she said quickly. "Jared will be there to protect me."

Like Jared could do anything to help her once the vision started. Somehow I stopped myself from saying anything. I wasn't going to let myself stand in the way of her living the life Mac could have had.

"Thank you," she said softly.

"For what?"

"For not trying to stop me."

I laughed dryly. "Do you really think I could?"

"No," she said firmly, "but that doesn't mean that you couldn't try."

"You're a big girl," I reminded her. "This is your life, your decision. Like I said, you gotta do what you gotta do."

"Well listen, you should probably get back to sleep and I need to pack yet."

"Okay." I didn't want to let her go, but I was afraid if we talked much longer I'd lose my resolve and tell her she couldn't go with Jared tonight. "Call me when you get back."

"Yeah. Good luck with Mac," she said wryly. "You'll need it."

"I'm sure I'll need it," I said at the same time. "Okay, well uh, be careful."

"I'll be as careful as I can be," she assured me.

"I love you," I told her softly, trying very hard not to cry. I must have been more tired than I'd realized.

"I love you too."

We said our good-byes and I hung up the phone, cradling it to my chest for a few minutes. If I believed in God I would have prayed for her safety. As it was I could only trust in Corrine's strength of will and whatever fate there was in the world that she would get through her seeking without any permanent damage.

Everything I'd done in my life since the raid I'd done so that Corrine would have a chance at the life her father had lost. I'd sacrificed everything to make sure that she would be safe, to see that she could grow into someone that Mac could be proud of. Well, she was there. How could I regret anything that had led to this moment?

I stretched my injured leg, wincing at the pain. It would be all right in a day or so, what concerned me more was how weak I felt. Of course, that would be better too after I had more sleep. I pulled the robe over my lap like a blanket. I was still cold, but I didn't have the energy to make it to the bedroom for a blanket. For a while, I slept.

I woke some time later to stumble to the bathroom. When I made it back to the couch I watched the sky light up in pinks and purples and waited for the day to turn into night. I didn't want to fall asleep in case Mac called or showed up. To try and stay awake I let my mind settle on a subject I'd been trying to avoid thinking about.

Maybe agreeing to the whole puppy thing was a good idea. For real now, keeping Kindred away from Corrine was pretty useless if she was going to go out looking for them. I needed another alternative to keep her safe and, as usual, I had to admit that Mac's idea seemed like the best one.

The only thing stopping me was remembering how Linda had been for Kate's blood. I didn't want to end up like that, an addict totally dependent on my master. Would Mac do that to me? Would he be that controlling? Which brought the question back to just how much I trusted him.

And it wasn't that I didn't trust his judgment, because he did tend to think things through while I usually staked first and asked questions later. He'd always had a clear head and it seemed to me that he'd honed it even more since his embrace. Could I trust him not to use the blood bond to control me?

Yeah, okay, I trusted him not to kill me while he drank my blood, I trusted him not to bite me while he was sleeping or when I didn't want him to, but did I trust him not to take away my individuality, my free will? Did I trust him enough to just hand over that much control of my life?

I'd watched him with his family, with Corrine. I'd seen the way that he still tried to protect those that meant something to him. I knew he cared about me, I just didn't know how much. Yeah, he said he loved me, but a part of me still wondered if he was just remembering what he'd once felt for me. If he did love me, I knew I could trust him with anything, even this.

That brought me back to the real question, didn't it? Did I trust him to love me, to take care of me and the things that I knew were important? How much did I trust him, really trust him, deep down in my heart?

Abruptly I remembered sitting with Corrine in a car in the middle of one of the neighborhoods I'd lived in as a child. It was a horrible place, not safe even in the daylight, but I'd sat there trying to explain to my daughter just what true love was. *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'd told her, meaning every word of it.

Back in New York I'd told Corrine that if Mac has asked me to I would have lived in that war zone with him. Now here we were in a war zone between my past and his present. Suddenly the answer seemed so clear I had to wonder why I'd hesitated.

For real now, it didn't matter if he loved me or just remembered loving me. It didn't matter that what he was asking me to do went against everything I'd ever believed. It didn't matter that he was Kindred and it didn't matter that I could turn into some kind of zombie by drinking his blood. I loved him, and that was the only thing that mattered.

Corrine's safety was still a priority for me, but aside from that I knew I couldn't stand to lose Mac again. If he could guarantee that our daughter would be safe, I'd do whatever I had to so that we could be together again, even if it meant giving up my free will to do so.

Exhaustion hounded me and I knew I couldn't stay awake any longer. I fell asleep wondering if maybe true love could conquer all.

COMPROMISES

I'VE BEEN LONELY
I'VE BEEN WAITING FOR YOU
WHAT ABOUT LOVE – HEART

I woke suddenly when I heard the door open and felt the vamp come into the apartment. I peered out from mostly closed eyes and looked toward the kitchen, but the angle was wrong and I couldn't see who had come in. I hoped it was Mac, but just in case it wasn't, I reached for the stake I'd stashed under the cushion my first night in the apartment.

"Luv?" I heard Mac say from the kitchen.

I breathed a sigh of relief that it was him and not someone I'd have to fight. For real now, I would have lost. "I'm in here," I called to him softly as I sat up and reached up to turn on the lamp next to me. A moment later light spilled across the room and I tucked the stake back into the cushions.

"Are we alone?" he asked softly.

"As far as I know," I told him, "unless you brought somebody with you."

I could hear him walking toward the living room, but he stopped for just a moment before coming into the doorway. I sat up a little and tucked the robe around my bare legs. It was cold in the room, but I didn't have the energy to get up and turn the heat on.

"Get into a fight?" he asked as he walked toward the couch.

"What was your first clue?" I moved over so that he could sit down next to me.

"The jeans in the trash," he said dryly.

I knew I should have taken care of those, I could smell the blood on them from here without even trying. "Just a little bit."

He studied my face for a moment. "Why don't you sleep?"

I shook my head. "I've been sleeping all day."

"You still look like you need some more," he told me.

Just what I wanted to hear. "Gee, thanks." When he sighed, I added, "I've been sleeping all day, I don't want to sleep."

"You don't really look dressed for much else," he drawled.

"Why, did you have in mind dinner and dancing?" I didn't have the energy for either, but the mention of food reminded me that my stomach was eating itself.

"We've had worse dates," he murmured. "Wait, it was dinner and dancing."

I chuckled a little. It was good to have him here. "I'm glad you could come by. How long do you have?"

"The night."

I smiled. "What a coincidence, so do I."

He smiled back. "Funny how that worked out."

I rested my head against the back of the loveseat. "So what have you been up to?"

His answer surprised me. "I visited Kate last night."

"Oh?" That was interesting news. "Can we kill her yet?"

"Not yet," he told me.

"Damn." I really wanted to be the one to separate her head from her shoulders.

"She's not cooperating yet," he added.

"Wouldn't that be even more reason to kill her?" One could always hope, anyway.

"We still haven't found her other ghoul."

That had been on my mind a lot over the last week. "Did you figure out if it was Linda?" If it was, I thought I had a few ideas about where they could look for her.

"We haven't been able to positively ascertain whether it is or not," he replied. "From what Micky says, I've made the most progress. I managed to break through her self-control."

My eyebrows shot up. "And how did you manage that?"

"I told her what a good time we've been having," he drawled softly.

I didn't like the sounds of that. "What did you tell her?"

"Everything."

Wonderful. "Like she needs to know," I said resentfully.

"I even embellished a few things," he added.

"Great."

"It worked."

I closed my eyes and took a breath to control my temper. "She doesn't need to know anything about me," I said evenly.

"She already knows more than anybody else, Eliza," he reminded me.

"All the more reason to kill her," I replied with a grim smile.

"We're working on that," he said coolly. "However, at the moment she is under the control of the clan. Until they say so, we can't kill her."

"It would have been nice to have killed her two weeks ago," I muttered under my breath.

He heard me. "Then there would have been hell to pay."

"That's why I didn't kill her." Duh.

"Good choice," he said dryly.

I didn't want to argue about it, I'd turned her over like they'd ordered. "Any idea when we can kill her?"

"No," he answered. "Be patient, she's not going anywhere."

"I don't have much patience," I told him bluntly. "You should have picked up on that by now."

"You?" he said with mock surprise. "Impatient? No."

"Yeah, and I have such an even temper, too," I added sarcastically. I didn't want to argue with him, it was time to change the subject. "So have you talked to Corrine?"

"Yes, I had dinner with her on Sunday. We went for a walk."

I nodded. "I talked to her earlier today."

"How is she?"

"She's fine," I said. Of course it bothered me that she might not be fine for long. "She's going this weekend for her first seeking."

"She'll be fine," he assured me. "I'm assuming the family will be there?"

I hadn't thought about that. "Well, Jared at least."

"That's not quite the family I was referring to," he replied.

"You know, I don't know, I wasn't invited," I said trying to keep the annoyance out of my voice. "They didn't actually clear it with me."

"Corrine is a big girl," he reminded me. "She can take care of herself."

"I know that." It was hard not to the way she'd been acting lately. It was hard to accept that my baby had grown up while I was away killing things to keep her safe. A part of me would always think of her as the little ten-year-old girl that I'd left behind when I joined the Society.

"I'm sure Jared explained the dangers of the seeking," he added.

I nodded. "He did, we talked about it."

He just looked at me.

"What?" I demanded crossly. "I didn't say anything, I didn't even try to talk her out of it."

"Do you think it would have done any good?" he asked.

I smiled sadly. "It would not have done any good, that's why I didn't even try." The girl was so much like her father it scared me. "She was supposed to have left this afternoon."

"Going back up to the cabin?"

"I have no idea where they're going," I said, trying to bury my resentment. "I'm not exactly in that club." I never had been even in Baltimore, and because of what I am I never will be.

"Neither am I," he reminded me.

"Not anymore," I murmured under my breath. At least he'd been there once, he had some kind of reference point talk to her about magic. I was out of the loop completely.

"I spoke with Ford last evening," he told me.

I looked at him in surprise. "Did you?"

"Yes."

When he didn't say anything more, I tried to hide my impatience. "And what did Ford have to say?"

"We discussed renegotiating the contract," he admitted.

"And...?" Damn, it was like pulling teeth.

"Well, we both agreed that the money would have to stop and that the stipulation concerning Corrine's well-being would also stay in effect," he told me. "However, even Ford knew that she was head strong and wanted to meet some of the family so that part is pretty well out. You will be pulled from the Society. I don't know if you will just be pulled or if they will stage something for your protection."

I hadn't thought about that. I wondered if I could just walk away from St. Stephen's without a problem. Not many people did, but then again not many people wanted to. Most of them were fanatical about killing monsters.

"You will be included in the clan security, most likely under Micky with myself," he added calmly. "Ford was interested in studying you and your abilities. A Dhampyr is very rare."

Great, I got to go under the microscope. Yippee. It wasn't something I was looking forward to, not at all.

He gave me a long thoughtful look that I didn't understand until he spoke again. "And Ford would like you ghouled to someone to assure that you don't act up and burn him in a limo." He said it quickly and the tone of his voice told me that he knew I'd killed Luther.

"Well I'm not likely to, am I?" I asked coldly. I seriously doubted Ford would give me a reason to do that.

"I don't know," he replied just as coldly. "I didn't know Luther so I can't speak on him."

That made me wonder just how much he knew about the whole incident. I sat up and tossed the robe to the side. "Yeah, well, he deserved it," I said bitterly as I rose to my unsteady feet. Limping, I made my way slowly to the kitchen.

"However, Ford does agree with me that the only one you would agree to be ghouled to would be myself," he added, following right behind me. "The ball is in your court, Eliza."

And here I'd never been one for playing sports. I opened the refrigerator looking for something quick to fill the hole in my stomach while Mac walked past me to put his coat on a chair.

"So it's not like you're asking too much of me, huh?" I murmured as I took out a block of cheese, some fruit and a soda from the refrigerator.

"This is all voluntary," he reminded me irritably. "If you don't want to you don't have to. The current contract can remain even longer."

Sure, I could keep murdering things until Corrine stopped forgiving me, keep getting stabbed, keep lying to everyone I knew. That's what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. Not. I turned and walked back toward the living room trying to gather the courage to tell Mac I'd be his puppy.

"What, no coffee?" he asked dryly.

"If you want to make it, I'll drink it," I told him. I was way too damn tired to make it myself, not to mention weak. I felt as if a stiff breeze would blow me over, but somehow I made it across the room to the loveseat.

"No, last time I made it you didn't like it."

"That was the first pot," I reminded him. "The second pot was okay." I sat down with a sigh and leaned back with my eyes closed for a moment to gather myself.

"I do have some more of the medicine if you are needing something," he told me.

I winced. "That was really nasty."

"As I said, most homegrown medicinals are," he said sounding amused.

"I'll be all right in a couple of days." I sat up a little and started eating the cheese. It tasted good, and the protein would go along way to help me regain the blood that I'd used and lost.

"When do you have to return to the Society?" he asked, still standing.

"Mass on Sunday. Charity thought I needed a break after this morning," I told him cynically.

"What did happen this morning?"

"Poor planning." I took a long drink of the soda before continuing. "A group of mage wannabe's that they think killed Gerome. We attacked and there were a few more of them than we thought."

"And one of them got you."

I looked down at the angry red scar on my thigh, thinking it should be about obvious. "Yeah."

"But you healed it, I see," he murmured.

"As much as I could," I told him with a sigh. It had been a close thing, too close. I finished off the cheese and started in on the apple. "So when would this change in contract take place?"

"I did not ask, actually," he admitted. "I'm assuming it would be as soon as possible. Lord Radek can draw up the papers, if it isn't already done."

This whole thing seemed a little bit too easy to me. "So what's in it for him?" I wanted to say that vamps didn't do anything unless there was something in it for them, but I figured he'd take it the wrong way, considering he was a vamp.

"Well, they have another mole in the society," he began.

"Bronwyn." I'd been a little surprised to see her at St. Stephen's considering I'd intercepted her a month ago and made sure the clan got to her.

"Yes, higher ranking and ah..."

"Better with computers," I put in.

"Yes."

Better with computers, but she sucked in a fight. "She's a wimp."

"Well, the meek shall inherit the earth," he drawled.

"Yeah, ri-ight." I shook my head, not believing it for a second. "The world belongs to the strong. If you can take it, you can have it."

"Are we going to sit here and quote philosophy all night Elizabeth?" he asked impatiently.

"Not exactly a normal subject for me," I said, reminded of the dream I'd had in Paris. But he was right, now wasn't the time to go all philosophical. "So what is in it for him? I don't get it."

"Well," he said thoughtfully, "perhaps Ford has taken a liking to you, and possibly to me. And on a more pragmatic level, there are very few people in that chantry who could stand up to you in a fistfight. Or a stake throwing match, or a knife-throwing match. Knowing as much as you do about us, we can't just turn you loose."

"No, it wouldn't do for me to have a normal life, would it?" For real now, I couldn't stop the bitterness that I felt about that. I took a deep breath before speaking again. "So the money stops, Corrine is protected, I play bodyguard, and guinea pig—"

"And get to live the rest of your life with me," he said softly.

That wasn't what I was going to say, but he probably wouldn't have like it much anyway. "Well, that would certainly be a plus," I murmured.

"Thank you," he said disdainfully. "It's good to know you care."

I'd hurt his feelings. "I didn't mean it that way," I told him apologetically.

"You could have fooled me."

If he thought I'd be overjoyed to lose my free will, he had another thing coming. "So we get to spend the rest of our lives together, but I get to be the puppy." How would he feel if it were the other way around?

He shot me an angry look. "Do you honestly think that I would treat you as a... puppy?" He said the word as if it were a dirty thing. To me, it was.

"I have a hard time believing that I could act like one," I admitted.

"Then it's a moot point," he said irritably.

"But I've seen it happen," I told him bluntly. His attitude was beginning to irritate me. "And no I don't think that you'd treat me like one. Not tell me everything, yeah, I could see that happen."

"When you're completely honest with me," he began, but I cut him off.

"I've never lied to you," I cried, resenting that he could even think that I had. I've lied to a whole lot of people in my life, even my own daughter, but I've never lied to Mac, ever.

"You've never told me the whole truth either," he reminded me heatedly.

"About what?" I demanded.

"Pick a year."

I started to argue, but I knew he was right. I let go of my anger and irritation and got ready to spill my guts. "Pick one," I told him simply. "What do you want to know?"

"We don't have time for this, Eliza," he warned me, his voice cold and hard.

"What is it we have time for?" I asked him.

"Would you be willing to be ghoulded to me in order to renegotiate the contract?" he demanded harshly, suppressed anger in every line of his body. "To be free of the bounds of St. Stephen's, to be with me, to allow Corrine to lead a life more fitting to her own choosing?"

RENEGOTIATIONS

I'M AMAZED WHEN PUSH COMES TO SHOVE
WHAT I'D GIVE TO YOU - EVERYTHING
AMAZED - POE

This was it, wasn't it? The moment I gave up everything to be with him. It wasn't so bad, Corrine would still be protected, and since I'd be his 'servant', nothing would be able to come between us unless we let it.

I looked down at the wilted daisy on the table and gathered my courage. "Yes," I said in little more than a whisper.

"Then why the walls?" he demanded.

"What walls?" I asked, looking up in surprise. When he sighed, I put the apple core down next to the daisy and sat back. "Look, I'm tired," I said apologetically, "and I don't feel good."

"So go to bed," he ordered.

"I don't want to go to bed," I told him crossly, "I want to spend time with you."

"Then why are you arguing with me?"

Why was I? One word; fear. I'd agreed to the ghoul, but I was terrified of what it would do to me. There's not very much I'm afraid of, but the thought of turning out like Linda strikes terror into my heart.

"I'm sorry, I don't mean to be defensive," I said softly. Corrine had told me to open up, and I guess now was the time to do that. "It's just that when I think about the way that Linda was... I don't want to be like that."

"Linda was the way that she was because Kate is the way that she is," he said impatiently. "If you're implying that I'm going to be like your mother we have a lot more to talk about, or a lot less."

He was right, of course. He had to be or I'd never be able to go through with this. "I can't imagine you being like Kate."

"Then you don't have to worry about being like Linda," he told me firmly. "I'm not going to ghoulish you and leave you in charge of my child, you've already done that for me."

No, he'd died and left me in charge of his child. I shook my head to chase that thought away and said out loud, "That's been the only relationship I've seen up close between—" I stopped because that wasn't really true. "Well, you know, other than the one who killed his ghoul in Richmond, that's the only relationship I've seen up close between a Kindred and his ghoul – her ghoul – it's ghoul." I had no idea what the proper grammar was and I didn't care. "Whatever."

"You've seen Brenda and Rafe, haven't you?" he asked me.

"As little as possible," I said reluctantly.

"But you have," he insisted.

"Not exactly up close and personal," I told him. When I saw how pissed he was getting, I quickly added, "But yes, I have. Are you going to stand there all night or are you going to sit down?"

"Are you going to argue with me all night?" he shot back.

I smiled. "I thought you liked it when I argued with you."

"Not particularly," he drawled.

I closed my eyes and sighed. "I will try not to argue with you."

"And the devil will buy snowshoes," he muttered under his breath.

"As I said," I repeated slowly, "I'm tired and I don't feel good. I'm sorry. And no, I'm not going to bed," I added before he could tell me to.

"What do you want me to do about it?" he demanded.

"Have a little patience with me," I suggested.

He smiled grimly. "In case you haven't noticed, I'm not exactly the most patient person."

I'd noticed. "Are you going to sit down or are you going to loom all night?" I asked softly.

"I'm thinking of looming for a little bit longer," he said, crossing his arms.

"And you say I'm argumentative," I mumbled.

"I'm not arguing with you," he protested. "I'm telling you I'm planning on looming a little bit longer."

Whatever. "So you have no idea when Ford wants to put the new contract into effect?" I supposed it would be better to have it over and done with.

"I can call him and ask him," he said dryly.

I just raised my eyebrows and looked at him until he pulled out his phone and walked into the kitchen to make the call.

I heard him dial a number, then a woman pick up on the other end. Mac asked for Lord Radek, and the operator transferred him.

"Young Cormac," Ford drawled in greeting.

"Lord Radek," Mac replied respectfully.

"What can I do for you this evening?"

"I have been going over with Eliza the terms of the new contract we discussed yesterday," he told the regent.

"Yes, I'd heard you had the night off."

"Yes. Eliza was wondering as to a time frame for the renegotiations."

"Is she suggesting a time frame or wondering what time frame we have?" Ford asked.

"She is wondering when you were desiring to do this."

"Well, whenever it's convenient for her. I do have the contract in front of me."

"Could you hold on just a second?" Mac asked.

"Of course."

Mac walked back into the doorway with his hand cupped over the receiver and stood there looking at me expectantly. He knew damn well I'd been listening.

"He's got which contract in front of him," I asked emotionlessly, "the new one, or the old one?"

"Well, if it isn't the new one, I'm sure he can have it drawn up by the time we get there," Mac replied impatiently.

"Oh, you want to go there now." At the hard look he gave me, I rose unsteadily to my feet. "Okay, give me a minute to get dressed." He was in an awfully big hurry for me to sign my sanity away.

Mac put the phone back to his ear as I walked toward him. "Lord Radek?"

"Yes."

"We will be arriving at the chantry shortly," he told him. "Eliza is going to change into something a little more appropriate."

"Very good," Ford replied. "I'll have everything ready for your arrival."

I just bet that he would. I hoped his hospitality was nothing like Luther's.

"Thank you my lord."

"You're welcome." At that I heard the regent hang up, and Mac put his phone away before following me into the bedroom.

What, he didn't think I could dress myself? "So what is appropriate chantry attire?" I asked him, trying very hard not to sound as irritated as I felt.

"Something not break and enterish," he advised.

That cut out all my favorite clothing. It took me a minute to find something nice enough that would be warm too. I was cold, but most of my shirts had short sleeves. And it didn't help that I was having a hard time balancing on my injured leg. Finally I found a long sleeved blouse that was way more feminine than anything I usually wore. I grabbed a pair of jeans and sat down on the bed to change.

"Accessories?" I asked as I pulled his tee shirt over my head.

"Unless you're planning on taking a hands-on renegotiations," he replied.

I put the red shirt on then stopped and looked at him. "Is that no accessories, or minimal accessories?"

"Whatever you'd like to carry," he said sounding very impatient with me. "Whatever makes you comfortable."

"God, you're irritable," I muttered, bending to put my legs in the jeans. "Did you not eat tonight?"

"No, as a matter of fact, I didn't," he replied.

"Well don't look at me," I told him, "'cause I don't have enough to go around." It was hard to get my shoes on, I couldn't put my left leg over my right because of the wound, and I didn't want to bend my right leg and risk reopening the gash.

"Would you like some extra?" he offered.

I glanced at him from the corner of my eye and he looked very serious. "Let's get the contract signed first," I replied. He was awfully damned eager to feed me.

"With the contract signing, they will most likely want the first feeding," he warned me.

There was nothing I could say to that so I just didn't say anything. I finally got my shoes on and stood to tuck in the shirt and do up my pants. I put a stake at its usual place at my back, and clipped the knife holster to my waistband.

"Are you going to be carrying your gun?" he asked.

Like I'd been wearing it since I got back. "It's in that drawer," I said, gesturing toward the dresser built into the wall.

"Everyone else will be," he added as he went to get it for me.

"I can't believe they're going to let me go armed into a chantry," I told him. "They've never done that before. Well, except for Berlin and Paris. Here they've never let me go into a chantry armed." Of course, if I'd been armed at the chantry in Burlington, those bastards never would have been able to hold me.

"Well, if they say something at the door, you'll be with me." He handed me the gun and I clipped it at my left hip.

"I'm ready." Well, as ready as I was going to be.

We both grabbed our jackets on the way out the door and I was grateful for the warmth of mine until we got on the bike. The wind felt cold on my skin, almost to the point of making me shiver. I was more than ready for the ride to end at the chantry.

I didn't like the idea of just walking into the building, but this was Salem, not Burlington. I was walking through the front door, not riding in the back of a delivery truck, and this time I was definitely armed. Not that I thought Mac would let them do what Luther and his puppies had done. Still, I sure as hell wasn't going to say anything to Mac about my reservations, he was impatient with me enough as it was. For real now, you'd think he was the one about to sign his soul away.

He parked the bike in front of the chantry and I got off carefully. Maybe it wasn't such a good idea to do this tonight after all. Maybe we should have waited until I'd healed a little more. Who was I kidding; I was just looking for an excuse to put this off. I straightened my spine and headed up the steps right behind Mac, who was walking a little slower than normal for me to keep up.

I hated feeling vulnerable, hated going into this place without being in top form. It showed weakness, and I had learned a long time ago that weakness was the one thing you never showed to vamps. Most of them fed on it.

Micky and Sarah met us at the door. I didn't pay much attention to what they said, I was more interested in staying on my feet. Sarah walked ahead with Mac right behind her. I fell into step after him, and I could feel Micky's eyes on my back as he brought up the rear.

It made sense that Micky was behind me and that Sarah had Mac between us. If I were of a mind to do some damage, now would be a good time. Of course, I wasn't much in the mood or shape for doing any damage tonight.

Sarah led us into a huge library. There were a few Kindred sitting at a table on the far side of the room, but I didn't pay them much attention either. I climbed the stairs to the second floor as quickly as I could and fell into step behind Mac again.

We went a short way down a hall off the library and stopped in front of a large oak door. Micky knocked on it, and Ford called out for us to enter. I followed Mac in and stood a little behind him and to his left when he stopped in front of the large desk. I could feel Micky and Sarah just inside the room when I heard the door shut behind me.

I noticed a thick file on his desk that had my name typed on the tab. I remembered seeing it in Luther's hands as he stood over me in the dungeon, taunting me with my past 'indiscretions', he'd called them.

"Good evening," Ford said in his deep voice, thankfully breaking my train of thought. "You made it here in good time."

"We did not wish to keep you waiting, my lord," Mac told him. He was in full Cormac mode, actually, very respectful to the regent, who nodded.

"It's best to get this over and done with. Here we have the contract that has been drawn up." He picked up a piece of paper and placed it on the edge of the desk closest to us. "If that is acceptable, we can sign it. Once it is in effect, I will burn the old contract."

Mac took a step forward and to the side so I could get closer to the desk. I walked up to the edge and stood looking down at the piece of paper that would change my life. All our lives, really. Mac and I would be together, and Corrine would have fewer restrictions on her choice of friends. And of course Radek would have less to worry about.

Ford gestured for me to pick the contract up and I did. I felt a little embarrassed at the time it took me to read the short document, but reading was never one of my strong points, you know? Plus it had legal jargon that was hard for me to understand. It took me a couple of minutes but eventually I got the gist of it.

What it boiled down to was that I had to 'willingly' agree to three conditions. First, I had to submit to being Mac's servant, to aid him in whatever was required to serve him and the 'House and Clan Tremere'. And Mac was right, they wanted the first feeding to be tonight and they wanted the bond completed as quickly as possible.

Second, I was to maintain a position in the security force of whatever Tremere chantry my domitor – Cormac Brennan – belonged to. I was supposed to serve in that position to the best of my ability, regardless of the risks to myself. That part really wasn't a big deal, Mac had warned me that it would be in the contract.

Last but not hardly the least, I had to undergo a series of tests to show what my abilities were. The contract said that the tests were not to be invasive, whatever that meant, and that they couldn't risk my health or well being.

And what would happen if I didn't live up to my end of the deal? I was dead meat, of course, and all protection for Corrine would be dropped. Read 'embraced'. In return for my 'assistance and cooperation', Ford once again guaranteed her safety with his life, only this time her safety was limited to not being embraced or ghoulled.

It was a lot shorter than the last blood contract I'd signed, but somehow I felt that it would mean giving up even more of myself than the last one had. Still, there wasn't a whole lot of choice here, was there? Not if I wanted to be with Mac and let Corrine live the life she wanted. Finally I sat it down on the desk and nodded to Ford. I would have said something, anything, but I couldn't talk past the lump of fear in my throat.

Radek picked up the contract and pulled a knife and a quill pen from a desk drawer. He ran the knife blade across his finger deep enough to draw blood and dipped the tip of the pen into it. A moment later his signature was on the bottom of the contract. *Lord Ford William Radek, Duke of Wales.*

He passed me the contract and the quill, but cleaned the blade of the knife before handing it to me. I cut my finger as he had and placed my full name beneath his. *Elizabeth Prudence Gentry.* It was strange, I hadn't written my full name like that in ten years. When I straightened and took a step back from the desk I felt numb inside.

Ford looked at Mac and gestured at the contract. "Would you like to witness it?"

"I would," he replied. It didn't take very long for him to add his name beneath Ford's and mine. *Cormac Alaster Brennan.*

"Very good," Ford murmured as he pulled the contract toward him. He sprinkled sand across our signatures and set it aside to dry. A moment later he picked up the old contract from the desk and lifted it to the candle that burned at his side.

I watched him place a corner of the contract in the candle flame. It caught right away, the fire licking across the paper. He held it over a metal tray and we watched as it burned. As old as the blood was, I could still smell it when the fire reached it. When the flame was millimeters from his fingers, Ford dropped the remains onto the tray and stirred it with the knife until the entire page was in ashes.

The instant the fire died I felt something shift inside of me. It might have been my imagination, but I felt like a burden had been lifted from my shoulders. I took a deep shaky breath and let it out slowly. I'd dropped one burden for another, hadn't I?

I had to tell myself that this wasn't just a dream. The old contract was gone and that part of my life was over. I didn't have to find a way to keep killing for Corrine's sake, didn't have to wonder how much longer I could keep looking her in the eye. Mac and I could be together, finally. I looked up at him, but fear burned in the pit of my stomach when I thought about what I had to do next.

"You are free to use my office if you'd like to begin the ghoul-ing process," Ford offered kindly.

The thought of drinking Mac's blood in front of these vamps made my stomach roll in protest. Mac looked down at me patiently as if waiting for my opinion.

"You're the boss," I reminded him timidly. I hated the way I sounded, but it was an effort just to keep the fear from my voice.

"Perhaps she would be more comfortable in your room here in the chantry," Micky suggested when Mac didn't answer right away. "Not that you're staying here, but the room is still available."

"Perhaps that would be best," Mac agreed. He took my hand and I couldn't stop from clutching at it as he made our excuses and led me from the room.

I was damned glad he wasn't going to make me feed from him in front of them, it was going to be hard enough without an audience. More than anything I wanted to tell him that I couldn't do this, that even the old contract was better than losing my free will, but the deed had already been done. Even now our blood was drying on the new contract that signed my life away, again.

And anyway, Mac was right, wasn't he? He wasn't anything like Kate; I couldn't imagine him treating me like she'd treated Linda. He wouldn't do that to me, would he?

THE TIES THAT BIND

I KNOW NOW WHAT SHADOWS CAN SEE
THERE'S NO POINT IN RUNNING 'LESS YOU RUN WITH ME
SHACKLED – VERTICAL HORIZONS

"Relax, luv," Mac said softly as we walked down an empty hallway. "No one's going to bite you. Not tonight, at any rate."

I shot a glance at him, but I didn't answer. I tried to relax and look at the luxurious hall we were walking through, but I couldn't do it. Mac squeezed my hand reassuringly and led me around a corner to a bedroom that was larger than my apartment.

When we were inside and the door was closed, he let go of my hand and I limped over to the bed to sit down. It felt so good to be off my feet that I just wanted to lie down and sleep.

He sat down next to me and took my hand again. "Are you all right?"

Corrine had said to be open with him, hadn't she? To be honest with him. "I'm afraid, Mac," I admitted without looking up. My heart was pounding so loud I could hear it.

"Everything will be fine, luv," he told me gently. "It won't be as bad as you think."

What if it was worse? Damn, I had to stop thinking that way. When he put his arm around me and held me close, I realized that more than just my hands were shaking. Was I still cold or was it fear that made me shake? I was betting on fear.

"You said yourself that I'm nothing like Kate," he reminded me. "You won't lose everything like Linda did. This is for the best and you know that."

Yeah, best for everyone, right? Well, how the hell was it best for me if I lost everything I was to the blood bond?

He soothed me while I fought to remember why I'd ever agreed to do this. It took a little while for me to control the overwhelming fear, but somehow I managed. Eventually I was able to quiet my heartbeat, and my breathing stopped sounding like I'd run ten miles at top speed.

"It will be all right," he promised me, pulling back to look into my face. "I love you, and I'll take care of you. We'll be together for the rest of our lives. Isn't that what you want?"

"You know it is," I whispered.

He reached up and tucked my hair behind my ear. "Then what's the problem?"

I reminded myself that I had to trust him. Really, there was no other choice, was there? I'd signed the contract and agreed to drink his blood tonight and tomorrow night and the next night too. I'd promised to be his servant, and this was the first step toward that.

"No problem," I told him firmly, burying my fears and looking him in the eye. "Let's get it done."

He nodded and pulled a knife from his boot as he turned to face me on the bed. He made a small cut on his wrist and I watched the blood well to the surface. I took a deep breath before I brought the wound to my lips and drank.

I'd tasted my own blood before and this really wasn't that much different, but even so I almost gagged. It was thick and cool, room temperature like his skin. Still, it wasn't as bad as I expected it to be and I had to wonder what it was like for him when he fed from me.

The head rush I got surprised me. It was better than any liquor, and I knew it would be as addictive as heroin. It made me feel strong again, but not really any more so than I normally was.

He put his free hand on the back of my neck and pulled me closer to him. I felt his lips on my temple as he ran his fingers through my hair. It made me feel a little better about what I was doing, took the edge off my fear.

As I drank I noticed that I was finally starting to warm up. Logically I'd always known that Kindred blood could replace what I used to fight or heal, but knowing it and feeling it were two very different things. The blood woke me up too, more than any coffee ever could.

"That's enough, luv," he whispered against my hair after a few moments.

I let go of his arm and watched him lick the cut closed. It was almost erotic to see his tongue where my mouth had been just moments before.

"What do you feel?" he asked softly.

"Better," I replied honestly, looking up into his eyes. "I feel better." My leg still hurt, but at least I didn't feel like a child could beat me in a fight. Still, I was waiting for the blood bond to kick in, that or the pull of addiction to hit me. When it didn't, I felt like an idiot.

He nodded and stood up, holding his hand out to me. "Shall we go?"

Good idea. I took his hand and let him lead me toward the door. When we left the room, Micky was walking down the hall toward us.

"Any problems?" he asked almost too casually.

"Not at all," Mac told him.

I just looked down at the floor and kept silent like a good little puppy.

"Do you anticipate any problems?"

"No," he replied, then asked hesitantly, "But would it be possible to have the next few nights off, to complete the bonding process?"

"That's probably best," Micky told him. "Bring her in on Monday, Ford wants to get started on the tests."

"Have there been any arrangements made for her leaving St. Stephen's?" Mac asked.

He glanced at me. "We can take care of that tonight, but we need the van."

I pulled my key ring from my pocket and removed the apartment key before holding the rest of them out to him. "It's parked behind my apartment."

He took the keys. "Wonderful. I'll send someone over to pick it up tonight." He gave me a meaningful look. "Eliza Dushku dies tonight, is that clear?"

"Crystal," I replied. I'd walked away from lives before, the only difference here would be that I'd be staying in the same town.

"Do you have ID?" he asked. "Anything the society knows you always carry?"

"A couple of stakes," I replied, pulling my license from my back pocket where I always kept it. "My knife is pretty unique."

"May I have it?"

I glanced at Mac, and when he nodded I unclipped the sheath from my belt. Micky took the knife and my license with a smile then looked back at Mac.

"There will be a packet of identification ready for Miss Gentry when she returns on Monday," he said. "Birth certificate, drivers license, the works."

Mac looked pleased. "Very good."

"It would probably be a good idea not to return to the mansion until the bond is complete," Micky added. "I think Brenda would have the same reservations that Elvira has about unbonded ghouls staying under her roof."

"I understand," Mac replied. "We'll stay at the apartment until this is done."

"Let me know if you need anything," Micky added with a smile.

Mac said our good-byes and we walked in silence through the house and out the front doors. I felt the ghoul at the door watching us, and he visibly relaxed once we got outside of the house.

"We can go try and find the carnival in Boston," Mac suggested when we reached the bike.

"I think not," I said before I could think about it. He was the master, if he wanted to go to the carnival, that's where we'd go.

"We could go see how they've remodeled Guilty Pleasures."

I didn't like that idea either, but he was the boss. "If you want."

He looked down at me for a moment. "What's wrong, luv?"

"Why do you think there's something wrong?" I thought things were going exactly the way they were supposed to now.

"You haven't made a vamp crack in," he glanced at his watch, "a good hour. You're not arguing with me, and you're doing everything I say willingly."

Wasn't that the point of drinking his blood? Becoming his puppy? Loosing my free will? "Do you want me to argue with you?"

"You'd be better company," he muttered.

What-the-fuck-ever. "If you want to argue, we can argue," I told him evenly. "What do you want to argue about? If you'd like me to make a vamp crack—"

"No," he interrupted me, "I was just wondering why you weren't you."

Other than the whole blood drinking thing? I refused to bring the subject up again, if he didn't get it by now, he wasn't going to.

"Did you have something you wanted to argue about?"

"Not necessarily." He handed me the helmet and put on his own.

"Cause earlier you were yelling at me for arguing."

"What was I yelling at you for?"

"Arguing," I reminded him. "'Are you going to argue with me all night?' 'We don't have time for that.'"

"Well, we have the time now," he said coolly.

"So what do you want to argue about?" I was more than in the mood for arguing if that was what he wanted me to do.

"It's not necessarily argue," he told me harshly. "Talk to me or something."

Or something; finally a suggestion I liked. "Here in the courtyard of the chantry?"

"Where would you like to go?" he demanded impatiently.

"Wherever you wish." Maybe now he regretted all those 'as you wish' statements. "So where do you want to go? You're driving."

"Okay." He got on the bike and I climbed on behind him. He drove to the Bathori Mansion, which surprised me.

I'd driven by the mansion before, even staked it out a time or two for the Society, but I never thought I'd be invited inside. When Mac asked if I wanted to come in, I wasn't sure what to say.

"We'll be spending some time here in the future," he said softly.

I hadn't really thought about that, although I guess I should have known. I followed him inside and through the elaborately painted halls. No one else was there, and Mac went directly to his room for some of his clothes. He shoved them into a bag along with a few books. We didn't stick around very much longer than that.

We went back to the apartment where he told me to dress in something more comfortable. It felt good to get back into my regular clothing. White tank top, black jeans, and a biker leather were what I was most comfortable in, with heavy boots that I could drop a stake into with no problem.

It felt wicked strange to be with him like this again, doing normal stuff like changing clothes together. I wanted to get closer to him, to run my hands down his back and feel the coolness of his skin under my fingers, but everything was different now that I'd fed from him.

He was in charge here and I didn't want to do anything that might make him think I was trying to take over, I knew better. I was just the puppy now, wasn't I? The thought left a bitter taste in my mouth and it tasted like his blood.

ENTERTAINMENT

TELL ME WHAT YOU NEED, TELL ME WHAT TO BE.
WHAT'S YOUR VISION? YOU'LL SEE, WHAT DO YOU EXPECT OF ME?
DEAD BODIES EVERYWHERE — KORN

The main floor of Guilty Pleasures was a lot different from the basement. The building had once been a church, and while Kendall had decided to stick with the whole church theme, I doubted any of his customers had been in a regular church in some time.

Facial piercings, tattoos and leather were the fashion here, and even with our jeans and leather jackets, Mac and I were seriously underdressed. A few of the patrons gave us speculative looks, but no one met my eye for long. I could feel frustration brewing inside of me and I knew a fight would help me blow off steam. Unfortunately, no one wanted to give me one.

Over by the pool tables was a good possibility though. Two Brujah were shooting pool and being generally annoying to other customers. I wondered if Mac would mind if we got into a little altercation, it was quite possible. The guy of the pair was Rob French, the bastard who had bitten me right after I came to town. The scar on my neck made it impossible for me to forget him and I was quite sure he hadn't forgotten me. Vamps don't usually forget someone who stakes them.

We found a table across the room from the Brujah and Mac asked the waitress for a scotch and a pot of coffee. I gave him a funny look at that, but he just smiled at me. We sat down and the waitress brought our drinks a few minutes later.

"So, how do you feel?" he asked after she left us alone. "And don't say 'better' or 'how do I want you to feel'."

I looked down at the irritation in his voice. If he didn't like the situation, maybe he shouldn't have started the contract renegotiations.

"Well, my leg hurts," I told him honestly. I'd healed it as much as I could earlier, but I hadn't had enough blood to finish the healing. I figured I'd try again before I went to sleep, now that I had a little more blood in me. I winced, remembering how I'd gotten that blood.

"Would you like some more to heal it?" he offered as if he was reading my mind.

I glared at him, but he was looking out into the crowd. "I don't think so," I said firmly. I didn't want to drink any more from him than I absolutely had to. "I'll be okay. I'm not as tired as I was, but I'm still kinda hungry." The little bit I'd had to eat earlier hadn't done much for me.

He handed me the menu and when the waitress came back by I ordered a burger and some fries. While we waited for the food we listened to the band and watched the crowd in silence.

"When was Corrine supposed to come back?" he asked after the waitress brought my food.

"She's gone the weekend," I told him. "She'll be back Sunday."

After the first bite I realized just how hungry I was. Mac took a few of my fries and ate them, but I didn't say anything. If he wanted to throw up later that was his problem.

"So what did you do with Corrine on Sunday?"

"We had dinner and she showed me her apartment," he replied.

"Nice isn't it?" I asked around a mouthful of fries.

"Yes," he said, "it's nice to see the money is well spent. She showed me your apartment as well."

"I figured she did." No one else would have left me a daisy. "What do you think of it? And am I keeping it?" I didn't like the thought of giving it up so soon, Corrine had gone through a lot of trouble to furnish it for me.

"Yes," he assured me. "It's nice to have extra places to go. I met Brian."

Extra places. That meant we wouldn't be living at the apartment. "He's a nice kid. Helpful." And easily dominated too, that was a plus.

He smiled a little. "I think he thought Corrine and I were dating."

"Yeah, that's what she said."

"Oh, you did tell me you'd talked to her earlier. How did that go?"

Didn't we go over this already? "Well, I managed to talk her out of coming over to see me. She probably would have freaked out." All that blood and me almost too weak to stand; it would not have been good.

"Did you get your lecture too?" he asked off handedly.

"She did say it was my turn." Corrine didn't know when to leave well enough alone.

"Yes."

"She's a little bossy," I told him, just in case he hadn't already guessed.

"Just like her mother," he muttered, but I heard him.

"I think it has more to do with Brennan genes," I replied coolly. "The women of your family seem a little, ah..." What was a tactful word for 'bitchy'?

"So do the women in your family," he said firmly, reading my mind. "A prime example is hanging in the dungeon."

"Is she hanging?" I liked that idea, a lot.

"Well, hanging out," he corrected. "If I had my way..."

"You know, we could fix that," I told him. "I'm sure there's chains down there." What Tremere dungeon would be complete without them?

"I just need to piss her off a few more times," he said as if he had specific plans to do so.

"I could stake her again," I offered eagerly. This time I'd do it hands on with a stake, I wanted to know exactly how it felt when the wood sunk into her chest.

"I like the chains," he murmured dryly. "We could watch her struggle and try and get free."

Okay, that took me places I didn't want to go. They'd done that to me in Burlington, you know? I could almost hear Luther's laughter when I tried to pull the chains from the wall. I covered my reaction by taking a drink of coffee and hoped Mac hadn't seen it. My 'punishment' was something I hoped we never had to talk about, ever.

"We still haven't been able to find Linda," he said after a moment.

"Are you sure it's Linda?" For real now, it could have been anyone. Thirty years was a long time to live under a Tremere master, especially one as unpredictable as Kate.

"No," he admitted, "but that's the most we have to go on."

"That and she was last seen in Charleston," I reminded him.

"I don't know what kind of influence there is in Charleston," he told me.

I shrugged. "I stayed as far away from that stuff as I could at that point."

"What did happen there?"

I looked away, not wanting to talk about it but knowing that I had to. "Well, Kate showed up and ah, there was this guy that I was staying with there, and he disappeared after she showed up. Of course, they had an argument first." The bitch argued with everyone.

"That sounds familiar," he said dryly.

"Yes it does," I admitted. She'd argued with Mac too in Baltimore before the raid. "I took off. I only saw her once."

"What was this guy's name?"

"Eddie Lane." I was pretty sure she'd killed him, so that made him the second death I was responsible for in my life. There were too many to count now, but the first ones I remembered all too clearly.

"Hmm, could be him," Mac murmured.

"You know, I never thought about that," I said slowly. It gave me the creeps to even think about it. Ghouled instead of dead; I hoped she'd killed him, it would have been kinder.

"About Linda, though," I added hesitantly, "she liked Pittsburgh a lot. She was wicked pissed when we had to leave. Of course it was all my fault."

"Of course," he said dryly.

"No, it was my fault," I told him truthfully. "I-I there was-I was—" I took a deep breath and started again, keeping my voice low. "I was in a fight and I frenzied, I killed a guy. It was my first time." Both for frenzy and for murder. "That was when I found out what I was. We couldn't stay in Pittsburgh after that, and Linda hated leaving."

He gave me a long hard look. "You never told me about this." He sounded so sure that I had to wonder if he'd gotten all of his memories back of Baltimore and what I'd told him there of my life.

"No, I've never told anyone," I replied honestly. "It's not something I like to brag about, you know? Kate told me the scoop on Dhampyrs and we moved to Atlantic City. That's the last place I saw Linda. She dropped me off at school and I haven't seen her since. It was a long time ago." A long time ago but sometimes it seemed like it happened yesterday. "But you're not sure it's her?"

"No, Kate has been less than cooperative."

"Would you be cooperative if you were in her shoes?" I asked him bluntly. "Or chains or whatever?" I sure as hell wouldn't be.

He shook his head. "I would have to say that at the moment it's her uncooperativeness that is keeping her alive."

"Don't you think she knows that?" Kate was nothing if not smart when it came to her own survival.

"It's time to step up the interrogation," he said softly, "but we'll worry about her later."

Good enough. "Just let me know when I can kill her," I muttered darkly.

"So there's nothing unique about Brian?" he asked, changing the subject.

I'd been checking into it as much as I could without drawing suspicion on him. It helped that Aislynn had known him in high school. "Not that I can tell. His cousin's a mage, and his other cousin is a ghoul."

"That's not necessarily genetic," he told me dryly.

"He went to school in New York with Rafe," I continued. "He manages Borders, and works on the side remodeling houses. You met him, what do you think of him?"

"I thought he was very nice," he replied. "He didn't try to stake me or anything, that's a plus in my book."

"Did you think that he would try to stake you right away?" I asked as I finished off my food.

"No, it would put a damper on Corrine's social life," he said, amused.

"Oh, yeah," I agreed. "Plus there's the whole 'how would he recognize what you are' thing." Not everyone had my Spider-sense.

"This place is certainly hopping," Mac commented as I finished off my coffee.

It was crowded, but not overly so, not what a place like this should be on a Friday night. "It's the band," I suggested. They sucked.

"I thought they were quite good, actually," he murmured. "Not quite whatever you listen to."

I rolled my eyes. "Rock and roll?"

He sighed, reminding me that we'd always had quite different tastes in music. I liked things hard and heavy while he preferred something a little less... head banging.

"You're right," I told him, hiding a smile. "They're not Metallica. They're not even close."

"No," he agreed. "Do you want to go see what's happening downstairs, or move on?"

Move on, please. Out loud, I said, "Whatever you want."

"I didn't ask you what I wanted to do," he shot back irritably, "I asked you what you wanted to do."

"It doesn't matter," I told him flatly. "I ate, had my pot of coffee."

"Yes you did."

"It's up to you, I'm just along for the ride." Wherever that ride may lead to. It was a good thing I loved him, I couldn't see being like this for anyone else. Of course, once the blood bond kicked in, it wouldn't have mattered who was in giving me the blood, would it? That thought made me damn glad it was Mac.

"We could start a fight," he suggested.

I was more than happy to hear him say that. "There's some Brujah over there," I told him. "They're stakeable."

"Amongst other things," he drawled.

"They have cue sticks," I observed, "they work really well."

Looking over at them, I saw that the Brujah had noticed us. Whether that turned out to be a good thing remained to be seen. Rob was watching me with animosity quite clear on his face. I smiled a little and reached down to loosen the stake in my boot.

"Well, they do know we're here," Mac drawled.

"Which makes it even easier," I replied.

"There is the whole masquerade thing," he reminded me. "Be nice."

Spoil my fun. "You seem to be saying that a lot," I murmured.

"Well, this time I'm included in it." To my surprise, he sounded disappointed. "Shall we go elsewhere?"

I shrugged. If I couldn't nail the Brujah, there was no reason to stick around. Mac threw some money on the table and we made our way through the tables to the door. We reached

the bike without incident, but when we were putting on our helmets I saw the Brujah at the door of the bar looking out over the parking lot.

Mac saw them too. "They seem quite interested in you," he murmured. "What did you do?"

I smiled coldly. "I staked the guy."

"And you didn't finish him?" he asked as he got on the bike, surprised.

"Ford said I couldn't kill any v-Kindred without approval unless it was Society related," I told him, getting on behind him. "He didn't say anything about not defending myself."

"What did the bad Brujah do?" Mac asked.

"He bit me," I said flatly, watching Rob as he scanned the parking lot for us. Lucky for him he didn't see us. "I left him in a warehouse and called the chantry puppies to let them know where I'd left him."

"That was nice of you," he drawled. He started the bike and before Rob could pinpoint where the sound was we were gone.

GOOD NEWS

HOLD UP, WAIT A MINUTE I'M ABOUT TO FLOW
LIKE A BREEZE THROUGH THE TREES YOU CAN WATCH ME BLOW
WASTING TIME - KID ROCK

We cruised the streets for a while, enjoying the cool autumn evening. Earlier I'd been cold on the bike, but now the temperature felt good on my skin. I guess there were bonuses to being a puppy after all.

After a while Mac pulled into the parking lot of Jester's, a bar that Micky owned. I thought he'd want to go inside, but he led me into the park next door, which I have to say I much preferred.

We held hands and walked down the dimly lit paths, enjoying the moonlight through the trees. Fallen leaves at our feet made a soft rustling sound that was relaxing even though it covered some of the night sounds around us.

We hadn't gotten very far into the park when Mac's cell phone rang. It was Corrine.

"Hi!" she exclaimed happily. "How are you?"

Mac looked at me as if to make sure I was listening. I smiled to let him know I was just in case he doubted.

"Well," he told her, "and you?"

"I just finished my seeking," she said enthusiastically, making me breathe a sigh of relief.

"Oh, really? How did things go?" he asked.

"Awesome," she replied sounding more alive than I'd ever heard her sound. "I killed the bad guy."

Mac frowned. "I thought you were against that sort of thing," he murmured.

"Well, you know, guy sucks on your neck—"

"Ah, Akari," he drawled.

"—it kind of puts a whole new twist on things," she said without pausing. "And it's not so much that I killed him, it's that I chose properly. I chose correctly," she added smugly.

"Ah, choices."

"Yep. And so I did it right and I wanted to call and tell you."

"Congratulations," he replied.

"Thanks." She sounded like she was off on cloud nine somewhere. "Have you seen Eliza?"

At that he held the phone out to me and I laughed.

"Corrine," I said softly into the receiver.

There was silence for just a moment before she answered. "Does that mean yes?"

Her pause threw me. "Um, yeah, I think it does."

"Oh, hi."

"Surprise you a bit?" I asked, wondering why she sounded different now that she was talking to me, almost disappointed.

"I just didn't expect the phone to get handed over," she told me.

I tried not to let her change of mood bother me. "Do you want Mac back?"

"No," she said quickly, but she didn't say anything more.

"So everything went well?" I asked awkwardly. I felt like she was excluding me because I wasn't and had never been a mage and it was hard not to be hurt by that.

"Yeah, everything went fine." She sounded a lot more subdued than she had been when she was telling Mac about it. "I take it that you were listening?"

"No," I denied. "It's just that Mac sounded so positive."

"Yeah, the seeking went well. I passed, so to speak." She was starting to warm up a little and I began to think that she really had just been a little surprised when I got on the phone. "Grandmother and Grandfather are here, that's really nice."

"Oh." I should have known that they would have been. If Mac were still human, he'd have been there too, right along with the rest of them. Damn it, he should have been there. "Just them or is it the whole family?"

"Well," she said slowly, "Siofra and Glenn are here."

I should have known they would be. Mac had told me a long time ago that his family was tight when it came to magic. "Yeah, and Jared."

"Of course Jared is here."

I hid a sigh. "So where did you end up going?"

"We're at this cabin in West Virginia," she told me. "Everything went great, I was really excited so I thought I'd call and let you guys know."

"Good." I wondered if it was Jane's family cabin, and if it was how they'd managed to keep using it after she died.

"So what are you guys doing?" she asked, brining me back to the present.

"Um, taking a walk," I said slowly.

"Oh? Where, in the park?"

I smiled at her inquisitiveness. "Yeah, the park over by Jester's."

"What are you doing?" She stopped as if she'd just thought of something. "Do you-do you want me to let you go?"

"I don't know where your mind is," I drawled. "No, we're just taking a walk."

"Okay."

I didn't really know what else to say. I didn't want to tell her about the new contract on the phone, so I said, "Do you want to talk to Mac again?"

"Sure," she replied, sounding relieved. "I have a message to pass on to him."

"Yes dear?" he murmured when he had the phone again.

"I didn't mean for you to—" She stopped in mid sentence, then said, "Your mom and dad told me to tell you they said hi."

He smiled. "Tell them I said hello."

"I will," she assured him. "Siofra's here."

"Oh, lucky you."

"Uh-huh," she replied dryly. "That's what I thought."

"Tell her I say hello," Mac suggested.

"Oh, great," she muttered. "Are you sure about that?"

"She is my sister, after all," he said softly.

"I know, but she's kind of mean," she told him.

"Blunt is a better word," he replied firmly.

"Like that's not a family trait."

"You're family, remember?" he reminded her gently.

"Well I have more—I don't know who I have more traits of because they're the same," she said irritably. "So are things going well? I guess you got the night off kind of thing?"

"Yes."

"That's good. So you guys are talking?"

"Amongst other things," he drawled.

"Ooh, that sounds nice," she told him.

I shook my head; the child's mind was the gutter more often than not.

"All right," she added, "I just wanted to call and let you know what happened. Everything went well. We'll be staying the weekend here, and I'll be back on Sunday."

"I'll be staying at the apartment for the next few nights as well," he informed her.

"Will you be there Sunday night?"

"Yes, for some of the night at least," he murmured. "I doubt we'll be there all night."

"Well, maybe I'll pop over."

"Have you learned how to gate?" he asked.

"No," she answered in a small voice. Then her voice gathered enthusiasm again. "I will stop by though. I'll see you when I get back. Maybe I'll ask Jared to teach me that gating thing. I'm on a roll."

"Oh? What can you do?" he asked, very interested.

"I'm feeling very powerful," she admitted.

I stood there and listened to her explain some of the things she was experiencing. It made me feel like I had in Baltimore when the mages would discuss magic; like a little kid staring through the window of a candy store at the things she would never see up close, never taste, never really know about. I turned away, happy that she had Mac to talk to about this stuff; I wouldn't begin to have the first clue.

"Did you know that Grandfather is not in very good health?" she asked him.

"No, I didn't," he said slowly. "I haven't spoken with him since our return."

"I'm kind of worried," she admitted, "because after the whole thing I'm realizing things and feeling things and so he's just not in the best of health. I'm wondering, would he take advice as far as, you know, I don't know how offended he would be if I asked him about things. Being as experienced as he is, he probably knows some of the things I'm sensing and I'm wondering if I mentioned something would he be put out, upset about anything?"

She was rambling, I'd seen it before after seekings. From what I understood, the mage had all their supernatural senses turned on at once and it took a little while to learn how to control them.

"I don't believe he could ever be upset with you, Corrine," Mac assured her.

"Well, some things are still touchy, regardless of who brings them up."

"You have the dear man wrapped around your little finger," he reminded her gently.

"I do not," she denied.

"You do too," he told her.

"Maybe I'll speak with Grandmother about it," she suggested. "Maybe he's been to a doctor. Did anyone say anything to you guys when you were here?"

"No, no one did."

"Maybe I'll speak to her," she said more firmly. "She's a wife, you know, she can puzzle it out. Okay, well, I'll let you go, enjoy your evening and I'll talk to you on Sunday."

He smiled. "Good night."

"Tell Eliza bye," she added.

I was a little hurt that she didn't want to talk to me again, but I understood why she didn't. This was a big night for her. "Good night," I said softly.

Mac passed that along and said his own good byes before hanging up the phone.

"She sounds a little excited, doesn't she?" I asked with a small smile.

"Yes, she could barely speak," he agreed.

"Well, I'm glad she's okay."

He looked at me in surprise. "Did you doubt?"

"I wondered," I admitted. Glenn had told me a few stories a long time ago, and Mac had seemed real withdrawn after the one seeking he'd done in Baltimore. "Do you remember any of your seekings?"

"Not yet."

"From what I understand, they're not exactly easy."

"No, none of the empowerment things are," he reminded me.

"Nothing comes free, right?" There's a price for everything in this world, even love.

"No."

"So where are we going to be staying after Sunday?" The suspense was killing me.

"Well, we'll stay at the apartment Sunday night," he told me. "I was thinking about staying at the mansion."

I didn't like the sounds of this. "I thought you *were* staying at the mansion."

"Both of us staying at the mansion," he clarified.

As much as I didn't want to stay there, it was better than being anywhere else without him. "If that's what you want," I said quietly.

"It is, for the time being."

I wanted to leave it at that, but I couldn't. "Is there a reason we can't stay at the apartment?"

"It will be best for you and the others at the mansion to familiarize yourself with each other," he told me firmly.

"I know what they look like," I reminded him irritably.

"That's not exactly what I meant, Eliza."

I knew that had annoyed him, but I couldn't resist adding, "I can avoid staking them in a fight, if I wanted to."

"You want to," he said quite clearly.

Yeah, Ford would probably be pretty pissed if I staked anyone else. Without permission, anyway. I was supposed to be a good puppy of the 'House and Clan Tremere'. "Have you talked to Brenda about this?"

"Not yet," he admitted.

"Somehow I don't see her liking the idea." Hey, maybe she'd veto it and we'd have to stay elsewhere. I could hope, anyway.

"You don't like the idea either."

Well, no, but, "It's her house; if she doesn't like it, she doesn't have to let me."

"Well, she can take it up with the prince," he drawled.

That surprised me. "This is what the prince wants?"

He nodded. "When I came to this city, I was told to stay either at the chantry, or the mansion."

"Given those two places, I can see where staying with Brenda would be better," I muttered under my breath.

"When I inquired about the housing, the choice was not amended."

Okay, so the mansion it was. "You were going to talk to Brenda about it before we showed up on Monday?"

He sighed. "I suppose I should."

"Yeah," I said firmly. "I don't think us showing up out of the blue would be a good thing."

"Why?" he asked thoughtfully. "Has she reason to dislike you?"

"Not any more than I have to dislike her," I assured him.

"What reason do you have to dislike her?"

I could see a lecture coming and I tried to avoid it. "None that I'm sure you'd agree with."

"Try me," he ordered.

Tell the truth, right? "She's a vampire."

"So am I," he said in a hard voice.

"I knew that," I told him. It was kind of hard to miss actually, at least for me.

He frowned down at me. "I thought we got over this whole 'hating Kindred on site' thing."

He was over it. "I didn't say that I hate her."

"Dislike, then."

I looked away. "Well, just because I go around not staking them doesn't mean that I want to be best friends with every Kindred I see."

"I didn't say you had to be best friends with her, or even like her," he told me, his voice low and angry. "However, if you are going to be my ghoul, in service to the House and Clan Tremere, you are going to need to learn to respect those of the clan, specifically the Kindred. You're going to need to learn to trust them."

I shot him a hard stare. He had to quote the damn contract to me, didn't he? I could work for the Tremere, but nothing said I had to trust them. I couldn't even begin to imagine trusting them.

The look he gave me back said that I'd learn to trust them if it was the last thing I did. "You need to know them enough to predict their reactions."

"You mean they don't all bite first and ask questions later?" Most vamps I'd seen did.

"No, we don't."

Damn it, he didn't have to sound so pissed, I hadn't included him in that category. I really had to learn to watch my tongue when it came to talking about vampires with my Kindred master. "Well, you're the boss," I told him, my voice dull even to my ears.

"So you keep saying," he murmured. "For someone who's unbondable, you're awfully damned compliant."

What the hell was he talking about? "Huh?"

"For someone that is immune to the blood bond," he told me with an angry look, "you're awfully damned docile."

"Where did you get that idea?" I demanded. "And I didn't know you could be." From what I'd seen, anyone who drank vamp blood was under the spell; there was no getting around it, no antidote, and certainly no immunity.

"Yes, you can be," he insisted harshly, "and you are."

How the hell would he know? "I can't recall ever trying it to see," I drawled.

"How many times did your mother feed you?" he asked sternly.

Kate? Feed me? "None that I'm aware of."

"Think," he commanded.

I did.

The taste of Mac's blood was still on my mind if not at the back of my throat and I tried to remember if I'd ever tasted anything like it before. Then suddenly it came to me. Right after I'd killed the guy in Pittsburgh, I'd almost died myself. Kate had been there when I passed out, and when I woke up that taste had been in my mouth. It had been there again when I'd come to in the Tremere dungeon after the raid in Baltimore.

Kate's blood, Mac had said in Nashville. *Given what you were born with and what you have been fed.*

She'd fed me; the bitch had actually fed me when I was out of it, not once, but twice. Damn, that's why I didn't die when I'd slashed my wrists as a teenager. That's why I didn't die when Valerie had drained me to the point of death. The bitch had fed me when I couldn't do anything about it. I couldn't believe how badly I wanted to kill her for that.

"Okay," I said slowly, my voice filled with barely contained rage, "say that she did."

"And you staked her," he reminded me.

"She's a bitch," I shot back. I'd lost so many things because of her. She deserved to die a slow and agonizing death and I wanted to be the one who gave it to her.

"Those that are bonded don't feel that way towards those they are bonded to," he told me fiercely.

This was almost too much for me to take in. "So, you're saying that she gave me blood and it didn't do anything to me?"

"Yes, that's what I'm saying," he replied irritably. "I'm saying you're acting like a damned puppy for no reason."

My eyebrows shot up. "Gee I was under the impression that I was a puppy," I said crossly. "I thought that was the point."

"No you're not," he insisted. "You're a ghoul, there is a difference."

If there was, I'd never seen it. "Is there?" I demanded.

"Yes."

"And the difference would be?"

"Puppies are ghouled specifically for their companionship," he told me quite seriously. "They are playthings. They love their masters because of the bond."

"And ghouls?"

"And ghouls don't," he said simply.

I didn't get it. "Don't love their masters?" Every ghoul I'd ever seen had been willing to die for his or her master, and more than a few had.

"Not because of the blood bond," he shot back. "They respect them, they feel affection for them. The love that you and I share has nothing to do with the blood bond."

I had to agree with that. "Well, considering it began before you were Kindred."

The look he gave me told me I'd hit his point right on the nose.

"So the way that works then," I said slowly, trying real hard to control my temper, "is that no matter whose blood I drink I'm not going to get the whole Linda effect."

"Right."

"Nice of you to tell me *now*, Mac," I nearly shouted at him. "You could have said something three or four hours ago." He should have told me this when I was shaking in terror about the whole thing.

"The clan doesn't know," he said calmly in the face of my anger, "and I didn't want to take the chance that they would find out. Do you really think that they would have agreed to renegotiate if they knew they'd never have the blood bond to hold over you?"

His logic cooled my rage instantly. If the Tremere knew that no amount of blood would change the way I felt, they most definitely would not have agreed to renegotiate. And there was no way to tell if they had been listening, or even watching while Mac was feeding me. It would be just like those damned control freaks to have a camera hidden in that room somewhere.

And you know, it didn't really matter if I was bondable or not, I'd signed the contract and I had to live by it, no matter what. I had to admit that Mac had tried to tell me that I wouldn't turn out like Linda, he'd said it more than once. I just hadn't believed him.

I laughed wryly and turned away, running a hand through my hair. Somehow Mac really had managed to get the best end of the deal with the clan, and if things went well, they'd never know it. I could give them what they wanted and still keep my sanity.

There was still one other thing, though. "What about the addiction?" I asked softly. "It was like a drug to Linda, she needed it more than food."

"I think that it's more a psychological addiction than anything else," Mac told me, putting a hand on my shoulder. "You'll get used to the taste and the power it gives you."

I turned and looked up at him. "But—"

He leaned down and kissed me before I could say anything else. For a long time I couldn't think about anything but the feel of his lips on mine.

Finally he pulled away and rested his forehead on mine. "We're together, Eliza," he said gently. "We'll always be together. Does it matter?"

"No," I admitted softly. "Corrine is safe and we're together. Nothing else matters."

We went back to the apartment soon after that and he insisted that I sleep. I agreed only if he would sit with me and he did, a book on his lap and a yellow candle burning next to the bed. He woke me an hour or so before dawn by climbing into bed with me. We talked softly for a while until the sun came up and he was gone.

I finished healing my leg before I fell asleep again and I didn't wake up until almost six. I was in the shower when Mac got up. When we finally got dressed for the night I drank from him again. It was better the second time, but I still wasn't sure if I could get used to the taste.

For some reason he decided that I needed to learn Latin over the weekend. I didn't understand why, but I tried. Languages aren't exactly my strong point, and most of the time I'd always been able to get my point across when I needed it. Besides, how many people speak Latin now days? I mean, other than Tremere and mages.

We spent the rest of the night enjoying each other's company. He took me out to dinner and we rode the motorcycle for a while before coming back to the apartment and studying Latin some more. The only time I can remember being more content was when we lived in Baltimore.

I got up around two on Sunday and went outside to stretch in the small back yard behind the house. I didn't really want to go anywhere else because I wasn't sure if the Society had bought my 'death' and I didn't know if they'd be looking for me. Better to be safe than sorry, right?

A little while later I showered and dressed, then went in the living room to watch television until the sun went down.

MONEY AND TEARS

AND ALL OF THE WORDS WE SAID
WE CAN'T TAKE BACK
LAST BEAUTIFUL GIRL — MATCHBOX TWENTY

Corrine called just before sundown and she agreed to stop for take-out on her way over. The sun went down a few minutes later and Mac got up.

"Good morning," he said, coming out into the living room dressed in a tank top and dress pants.

"Good evening," I replied. We grinned at each other. "Corrine's on her way over," I told him.

"Oh, how quickly?"

"I talked to her a few minutes ago, she's going to stop for Chinese." I got up and went to hug him. "We assumed you didn't want anything. Is that okay?"

He smiled down at me. "Nothing from the Chinese restaurant."

"Is there something you want?" I asked him. He hadn't fed since he'd been with me; I knew he'd have to eat sooner or later. Even the thought of his teeth in me made me feel warm.

"Well, I can think of something," he drawled.

I smiled. "Not a good idea with the child on the way over." It wouldn't do to have her walk in and see us... otherwise occupied.

"I'll go change into something more appropriate then," he told me.

I didn't see why, he looked fine to me. "At least you're not in your Tremere boxers." When he stepped back, pulled out the waste band of his pants and looked down, I added, "Only your Tremere boxers."

"Do we have anything planned?"

"I thought you were the boss," I reminded him drolly.

The look he gave me told me he didn't like my sense of humor.

He was in the bedroom changing when Corrine knocked on the door a few minutes later. I opened the door and took the food from her as I said hi.

"Where's Mac?" she asked as I set the food on the table.

"Changing," I told her.

"Are you guys getting along well?" she asked softly, as if the curtain between the bedroom and the kitchen were much of a barrier to noise.

"For the most part," I replied, smiling. "How was your weekend?"

"Great, really great," she said enthusiastically. "Grandmother and grandfather left about the same time we did."

"And the rest of them?"

"Of course you know Jared came back when I did." She took some plates from the cupboard and brought them to the table. "Glenn and Siofra left Saturday morning."

"Well, that's good," I murmured. At least they hadn't stayed to cause any more problems with her. "You didn't have to put up with them all weekend."

"Oh, they're not that bad," Mac said as he walked out of the bedroom.

I looked up from the silverware drawer to see him dressed in his usual suit. "Yeah, whatever," I muttered under my breath. To Corrine I said, "Do you want a soda to go with this?"

"Sure." She sat down at the table and set the food out on the small table.

"Did you want some of mine?" I asked Mac as I sat down with the drinks.

"No," he replied with a slight smile as he leaned against the counter to watch us eat.

"So what are your plans for tonight?"

"Oh, I'm going to meet up with some friends later," she told me casually.

I smiled. "Some friends?"

"Uh-huh."

I was willing to bet it was Brian. "Just any friends?"

She blushed. "Just uh, just your landlord."

"Oh, Brian," I drawled.

"You know, you need some fish or something in here," she told me, "to take your attention off other things."

"I don't think fish would do much good considering we're not going to be staying here," I told her, keeping the emotion from my voice. I'd really enjoyed the time Mac and I had spent together here the last few nights; I'd almost begun to feel normal.

"Oh, really?" she asked, intrigued.

"Not that I've spent much time here anyway," I mumbled.

"Where are you going to be staying? Are you moving already?"

I looked at Mac, he was the boss now. There was no malice in that thought, it was the simple truth. I went where he went.

"Yes, we'll be moving into a friend's house for a while," he told her, "but we'll be keeping the apartment."

"Oh? Who?"

"We're moving into the mansion."

Her face dropped. "Okay, so I guess I'll just be seeing you guys at my apartment?"

"No," Mac told her, hiding a smile. "You'd have to be invited by one of us, you couldn't just drop by unannounced, but you can come visit."

That surprised her. "Really? Correct me if I'm wrong—"

"You're wrong," he interrupted, smiling openly now.

"It's not nice of you to tease, Mac," I murmured.

"So I take it you renegotiated the contract?" she asked hesitantly.

"Of course, didn't I say I would?" He made it sound like it had been so easy.

"Yes, but I just didn't know how soon you could get it done."

"I got it done," he said smugly, as if he'd done more than witness the damn thing.

"That's good," she replied, but she seemed a little shaken.

"So, I quit the society," I told her softly, watching her face for her reaction.

"Really?" She shook her head. "I tend to think that's something you can't just give a resignation to."

Smart kid. "Well, okay, I didn't exactly hand in a resignation," I admitted. "It's more like they found a charred van and assumed I was in it." I didn't mention the body they'd found in it.

"Oh, you guys have been busy all weekend," she drawled.

I glanced at Mac. "That wasn't us," I corrected her, "but it was done. Anyway, no more society."

"That's good," she replied thoughtfully.

"And I hope you think you have enough money." As soon as I said it, I knew I should have phrased it differently.

"Okay," she said slowly.

"'Cause there won't be any more." That was what she wanted, wasn't it? For me to stop paying for her money with my blood?

She wasn't as happy as I thought she'd be. "I think if there's a problem, it's not really my money anyhow."

"It's your money," I told her flatly. How many times were we going to have to go over this? "So the upswing is that you can now meet Brian's relatives."

"That's good." She got up and dumped the rest of her food in the trash. "Did you say you were going to keep this place? Is that what you said?" she asked as she walked over to the sink to rinse her plate.

"We will only be staying at the mansion until things are copacetic between myself and Eliza and the rest of the household," Mac told her. "Then we'll be returning here or finding a house."

I broke off from staring at her empty chair to look up at Mac. This was the first time he'd mentioned finding a house and it surprised me.

"A little yard," he added with a smile at me, "white picket fence, we'll see."

"Well that's good," Corrine said as she dried her hands on a towel.

"Don't you think it's a little late for the white picket fence?" I asked him sadly.

"No, there's always room for fences," he told me.

"Funny, you always seem to get upset when I throw them up," I drawled.

"So do you guys have plans for the evening?" Corrine asked, drawing my attention back to her.

"Nothing we can't do later," he assured her.

"Okay." She leaned back against the sink, but her body language told me there was something wrong.

Mac must have picked up on it too. "Why?"

She shrugged. "Just making polite conversation."

"What's going on, Corrine?" he demanded softly.

"Nothing," she said quickly. "Why? Is there supposed to be something going on?"

"You seem rather morose," he told her.

"Ah, no," she denied.

"You usually eat more than that," I added thoughtfully. "Was the Chinese off tonight? Or are you off?"

"There is nothing wrong," she insisted.

"You're not acting like Corrine," Mac commented. He was right, she seemed like she was put off by something. "What's bothering you?"

Was it the change in contract? "I thought that you'd be happy that we renegotiated the contract," I said softly.

"Oh, I'm ecstatic that you renegotiated the contract." She said that, but her voice was dull and emotionless. "Why?"

"Then what's wrong?" Mac demanded.

At the same time I asked, "Then what's the problem?"

She shook her head again. "There's nothing wrong, I'm really happy that you guys are able to, you know."

"Corrine Mackenzie Wright," Mac all but growled.

"That'd be my name." She stuck her chin up like she always did when she was being stubborn.

"Don't lie to me," he insisted. "What's wrong?"

"There's nothing wrong," she denied.

"What's bothering you?"

"There is nothing bothering me," she told him, turning away.

"You can't lie to him," I told her softly, "he knows better." He was also damned insistent until he got what he wanted.

My advice didn't seem to matter much to her, she stubbornly refused to say anything.

He waited until she looked back at him. "Why don't you want to *share* what's bothering you?" he suggested. I could almost feel the compulsion myself.

"Because it is a subject that I believe Eliza would be uncomfortable with," she told him.

"I'm a big girl," I reminded her.

"So am I," she shot back.

"I've dealt with subjects that are uncomfortable for me a lot lately," I told her bluntly, "I think I can handle it. Or I could leave." I didn't want to, but if it would help her talk this out, I would.

"It's not that big of a deal, really," she insisted.

"If it's bothering you to the point it obviously is," Mac told her.

"It's not a big deal," she repeated firmly.

"Corrine, just tell us." He was losing patience very quickly.

"Look," she said sadly, "it's just really hard for me to deal with the fact that Eliza put her life on the line a lot for me and I get to sit back and reap whatever benefits there are. It bothers me that it's looked at that way."

"It's looked at what way?" I demanded irritably. "That I did everything for you and you don't like it?"

"I didn't say that I didn't like it," she protested. "It's the fact that, you know, ooh, nothing. Just forget it."

I looked at Mac, not sure what to say or do. I didn't understand why she was so upset with me. Wasn't this what she wanted?

"Eliza did what she did because she loves you," Mac told her, "and she wanted you to have a life that neither of us were able to live."

"I realize that," she said irritably, "and I'm very thankful for that."

"The best way you can repay her, which is what I gather you're thinking, is to do exactly that; be happy." He sounded like he didn't understand why she was upset either.

"I am happy," she replied tersely.

Ri-ight. "You don't look real happy," I stated calmly. "You're not acting real happy." Was it the money? She'd said she didn't care about it, but did she really? It didn't seem like her, but then again we never really know someone else, do we? Most of the time the face you see isn't what they are inside. Had I misjudged her so badly?

"I'm sorry," she said, pasting a fake smile on her face. "I will try very much to be happier."

Now it was my turn to lose my appetite. I got up and dumped my food just like she had only moments ago.

"What do you want from me?" she demanded as I crossed the kitchen to the sink. "I'm sorry that it bothers me, okay? I'm working on it."

I looked at her knowing that there was nothing I could say to her that I hadn't already said. I sat the plate in the sink and walked into the living room without saying a word. It was harder to walk across that room now than it had been Friday morning when I'd been tired and weak from blood loss. Somehow I made it to the loveseat without completely falling apart. I sat down and covered my eyes with my left hand, controlling my breathing so that I wouldn't break into tears.

I'd done the best I could for my daughter from the moment Kate had told me I was pregnant. Maybe I should have stuck to my guns when the clan tried to kill her, maybe I could have kept her safe. But deep down I knew that I had made the only decision I could have given the circumstances, and apparently it wasn't the one Corrine would have made.

I could feel Mac coming closer to me and when he sat down on the loveseat I turned and laid my head on his shoulder. He put his arm around me and let me draw from his strength.

"Corrine," he called after a few minutes.

I heard her come into the doorway but I didn't look up.

"I gotta go," she began.

"Sit," he ordered. She must have, because he kept talking. "Tell us what's going on. Everything, this time."

"The money doesn't mean anything to me," she stated flatly. "I could care less if there was more coming or not more coming."

"Then what is bothering you?"

"I don't know," she said, sounding frustrated. "The way that Eliza termed it, I felt as if she thought I expected more, and that's not the case."

I couldn't help it, I started crying. I was just trying to let her know that she'd gotten what she wanted, I sure as hell hadn't meant to hurt her.

Mac ran his hand down my arm to sooth me. "Eliza was trying to do all she thought she could for you."

"I realize that," Corrine replied, oblivious to my tears, "but the way she said that earlier..."

"What did she say?" he demanded softly.

"She said, 'I hope you don't want any more money'."

"That is not what I said," I protested through my tears.

Corrine ignored me. "She said something along the lines of 'I hope you have enough money', and it made me feel as if it was expected that I wanted more and it hurt my feelings. That's all, that's it."

I wiped my tears away and sat up. "Corrine I know you never wanted the money, that wasn't my intention to say-to hurt your—" I took a deep breath and started over. "I didn't mean to hurt your feelings when I said that."

"Well, I realize that it probably wasn't intentional," she replied warily.

"I know you don't care about the money," I told her.

She stood up. "That's just how it came off."

"That was not my intention," I repeated sadly. Damn, if I could just take those words back. "I'm sorry. I was just trying to let you know what's going on. Aren't you always telling me I'm not letting you know what's going on? Here I am telling you and you get mad at me."

"I'm not getting mad," she said angrily. She took a deep breath to calm herself and let it out with a sigh. "I'm not mad at you for telling the truth, it's the way it was presented."

She was right, I could have found a better way to tell her. "I'm sorry."

"It's no big deal," she said sadly.

"It is a big deal," I insisted. God, it was so hard for me not to start crying again. When did I get so weak? "You know I wouldn't hurt you for the world."

"I know," she said softly, and I could see in her eyes that she really did. "Um, you guys probably have stuff to do, I have stuff to do, and I've got school tomorrow, so um..."

"Tell Brian we say 'hi'," Mac said softly.

"I will." She half turned toward the door, then glanced back at us. "See ya later."

I couldn't leave it like that, I just couldn't. I got up and followed her into the kitchen with Mac only a step behind me. "Corrine," I called as she reached the door.

She stopped with her hand on the doorknob and looked at me.

"Look, I'm sorry," I said pleadingly. "Don't leave like this."

"It's over, it's done," she told me. "Don't worry about it. Just know that it's not a big deal."

But it was, it was a big deal. Knowing that I'd hurt her cut me to the bone. I could see in her eyes that there was nothing I could say to make it better, nothing I could do to take the pain I'd caused away.

"Okay," I whispered.

She glanced over my shoulder at Mac, then turned and opened the door. That quickly she was gone.

BUSINESS AND PLEASURE

LIKE EVERY HEART TO BEAT BEFORE
AND EVERY WAVE TO KISS A SHORE
DAYS AND DAYS — CONCRETE BLONDE

I stood staring at the door with my hand on the counter for balance. I felt like if I let go of it, I'd fall and never get up. Corrine and I had argued before, but it had never had the note of finality to it that I felt here tonight. I searched my brain for a way I could make things right between us.

Mac surprised me a little when he turned me around and took me into his arms. I welcomed the embrace, but I couldn't stop thinking about our daughter. It took me a long time to calm down.

"Well, that didn't go as well as I thought it would," I finally whispered.

"What did you expect?" he asked softly.

"Not that." I told myself that as much as I wanted to go after her, there was nothing I could do but give her time to adjust to the changes in our lives. "So what are we doing tonight?"

"Well, business or pleasure?"

"Business or pleasure," I murmured softly, trying to force my brain to work again. "Define business, define pleasure."

"We have the third feeding to take care of," he reminded me. "That would be the business."

Great, let's move on from one painful subject to another. "And the pleasure?"

He looked down at me with a grin, then led me back into the living room. "Well, Corrine's off on her date," he said softly, "and the clan doesn't need me until tomorrow."

"Us," I corrected him.

"Yes, us," he agreed. "It's seven thirty, we have the whole night ahead of us."

"Let's get the business over with and move on to the pleasure," I said as we sat down on the love seat.

"Let me make a quick call to Brenda while I'm thinking about business," he told me with a smile.

I nodded and sat back to listen.

Mac dialed his phone and when Brenda answered he identified himself.

"How are you?" she asked pleasantly enough

"Fine."

"Having a good time, I hope?"

"Yes."

"Well, that's good."

"I just thought I'd let you know that tomorrow if the presentation goes well," he told her without hesitation, "that Eliza will be moving in with me at the mansion."

"You could have asked," I hissed softly.

"Really," she replied, not sounding that surprised. "And how is the bond going?"

"We will be doing the third feeding shortly."

"Well, I hope that all goes well," she said coolly, "and as all puppies go, you will be held responsible for any of her actions in the house as well as wherever else she is. The chantry and so on and so forth."

"That is to be expected," he replied calmly.

"I figured you would understand that and you wouldn't need me to remind you," she added.

"However, I can foresee a few problems which other owners will be responsible for their puppies as well," he told her, "at the chantry and at the house. Since Eliza is known, I know of a few that don't like her."

That was to be expected, you know? I had a reputation for violence and I'd more than earned it. I knew I had to prove myself before they could trust me.

"Oh, I guess I wasn't aware of that," Brenda answered distantly. "We will make sure that everything is okay. If you need anything else, you know how to contact me."

"We will be back tomorrow," he repeated.

"All right. Good evening."

"Good evening." He hung up the phone and looked at me. "Whenever you're ready."

I looked down. "No time like now, I guess?" It had to be done, we might as well get it over with.

"In the middle of your living room?" he asked dryly.

I smiled. "Would you prefer the bedroom?" Of course we both knew that would lead to other things.

"Wherever you're comfortable."

"You're the boss," I drawled.

"The clan doesn't know you're not bondable," he said seriously.

"You're still the boss," I told him.

He smiled smugly. "And don't you forget it."

I chuckled. "I'm not likely to. So, bedroom, living room? Kitchen? There's knives in the kitchen, not that there's not knives out here." It hadn't taken long for Mac to find my stash of weapons.

He pulled the knife from his boot and sat back. I turned to face him and watched as he made the cut on his wrist. For real now? As much as I protested about drinking his blood, as much as I hated the thought of turning out like Linda, I liked feeding from him. I liked the way he tasted and I liked taking a part of him into me, knowing that he made me stronger.

I didn't feel any burning need for his blood like I'd seen Linda go through, but if given a choice I would probably have fed from him anyway now that I knew what it was like. It had kind of snuck up on me, you know? Like a craving for chocolate when you're feeling blue.

This time I knew how much to take and I pulled away when I was done. I watched him lick it closed and took a deep breath to calm my breathing.

"Well, that's done," I said softly.

"Feel any different yet?" he asked.

"Not really."

"I told you," he drawled.

"How would I be feeling?" I asked warily. "Maybe I feel different and don't know it."

"Well, you're the one that knows how you're feeling."

There was no use in getting worked up over this. Either I was bonded or I wasn't and it was way too late to turn back now. "Will we have to do this often?"

He shrugged. "If you don't use the blood at all, once a month will maintain you." He told me. "If you use it, it will have to be replaced."

"I usually replace my own when I use it," I reminded him. I knew from experience that I could 'spend' five units of it safely, after that I got too weak to do anything. It usually took twelve hours of rest to get one of those units back.

"Well, I'll have to replace mine," he said firmly.

"But at least once a month?"

"Yes."

That wasn't too bad. "So, on to pleasure?"

He smiled. "Yes."

"What did you have in mind?"

"Well, unless your tastes have changed in the last night," he drawled running a hand through my hair, "unless you're suddenly into whips and chains..."

I grinned. "Stakes and knives and such."

He took my hand and led me into the bedroom. "How are your blood levels doing?" he asked softly as we started to undress each other.

"Back to normal," I whispered. Hopefully they wouldn't be for long.

"Are you up to giving back a little of what you've been getting?" His hands down my back almost made me forget what he was saying.

"Yes," I murmured as I slid his shirt from his shoulders. My fingers ran down the burn scar on his arm, but I didn't let them linger. There were far more pleasurable areas of his body to explore.

When his teeth sunk into my neck a few minutes later I shivered. Did I make him feel like this when he fed me? Did knowing I took a part of him into me feel as good to him as me knowing he needed me to survive? Then the peace flowed through me and I lost all conscious thought.

A VISIT TO THE CHANTRY

NO ONE EVER SAID
THAT LOVE WAS GONNA BE EASY
LOVE WILL FIND A WAY - CHRISTINA AGUILERA

After he woke Monday night, Mac called the chantry and talked to Micky to let him know we'd be at the chantry by seven.

"We're prepared to start doing a little studying on her," Micky told Mac. "I assume she's feeling better?"

"Yes, she's feeling much better."

I had to blush at the way he looked at me when he said that.

"You'll be happy to know that the van was torched Friday night," Micky added.

"Where was it torched at?"

"Between here and Boston, on a beach," he said. "From what we understand, the society believes her dead. It does help that there was a body pretty close to her size in the van when it burned."

"Anyone I knew?" Mac asked dryly.

"No. You know we tend to keep bodies around for just this sort of thing, accidental feeding deaths and so on."

"Of course."

"Elvira will be here most of the night," Micky continued. "She wanted me to let you know that whenever you wanted to come in was okay with her and that we were prepared to begin the study whenever she's ready. I assume you'll be leaving for Austria in a few nights?"

"Yes." Mac had told me that we'd be flying out for Christina and Jason's wedding at dawn on Wednesday.

He finished the call, then fussed over my clothes. I didn't want to go too formal if they were going to be putting me through anything physical, but he insisted I look nice. We compromised by agreeing to bring a change of clothes for me.

When we got to the chantry a little while later, I was surprised to find I wasn't as nervous as I thought I'd be. Mac had told me over and over during the weekend that my new status as a ghoull afforded me some safety from any Kindred who had a grudge against me, and I knew I wasn't going to do anything stupid that might get me – us – killed.

My meeting with the prince went better than I expected it too. I was respectful, and although she watched me carefully, I didn't give her any reason to think I planned on being anything other than the usual puppy.

When her curiosity was satisfied, she let me know that Micky was waiting to take me downstairs to begin my testing. The mention of my guinea pig status got my heart jumping a little, but I didn't let her know it. For real now, never show the enemy weakness, even if she is the prince.

EPILOGUE

I woke to darkness and lay next to Mac feeling his unmoving cold body next to mine. After a few minutes I turned on the bedside lamp and studied his face in the dim light. It was still kind of creepy to watch him sleep, but I was getting used to it.

It still felt strange to me to be sitting still. I'd lived for so long moving from one thing to the next without a chance to catch my breath that having hours of nothing to do was almost overwhelming.

A little while later I closed the bedroom door softly behind me and stood in the hall for a moment. The house was silent, too silent, like everyone was gone, or dead. I shivered at the truth of that thought and went downstairs to the basement level where the kitchen was.

When I got to the bottom of the stairs, I could hear voices. There were two of them, both male. I really didn't want to be around the puppies, but I knew that was hypocritical of me now that I was one too. I took a deep breath and stepped out of the stairway.

The voices were coming from the area Brian was redoing for Rafe and his friend's office area. They didn't hear me, and I didn't announce myself. I walked to the back of the house where the kitchen was and right to the refrigerator.

It felt weird to be going through the cupboards, but I was hungry. I would have gone out somewhere to eat, but there was the minor problem of having no car and not being able to drive Mac's bike. I found the makings of a sandwich in the refrigerator and a pot of coffee ready to drink on the counter.

I stood at the sink looking out at the back yard while I ate. Things were still so new here, I had no idea if food was 'allowed' in other areas of the house, or if food had to stay in the kitchen, so I figured I'd be better off right there.

After I finished eating, I stepped outside. I liked feeling the sun on my face; it was nice after seeing only a dark sky the last few nights. It was a perfect fall afternoon with the smell of leaves filling the air. Soon winter would come and cover the ground but inside me I felt like the world was just coming to life.

It felt good to know that I'd never have to go back to the society, never have to kill someone based on some concept of right and wrong from the dark ages. I also wouldn't have to worry about revealing my true nature, everyone already knew.

Don't get me wrong, I knew it wouldn't be easy fitting into Mac's life. A lot of Tremere knew me by reputation and it would take some convincing to get them to trust me. But for real now, it's worth the effort, isn't it? No one and nothing but final death will ever take me from Mac again.