



ELIZA: SHADOWS OF THE PAST

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EVALUATION

EVEN IF IT'S A LIE

SAY IT WILL BE ALL RIGHT

I SHALL BELIEVE - SHERYL CROW

"Would you like me there," Mac asked as we walked through the Tremere chantry of Salem, "or do you mind if I take care of a few affairs here at the chantry?"

"What exactly are they planning on doing?" I asked, keeping my fear under a tight rein.

"A few personal matters," he murmured, looking off down the hall, making me wonder what he was thinking about.

"No," I said impatiently, "to me."

"Oh." He blinked and focused on me again. "I'm sure they will be testing your physical abilities, some sparring, weight lifting and so on."

That didn't sound bad. "Nothing big?"

"Nothing dangerous," he assured me, "or too dangerous."

"Okay, if that's the case then," I replied softly, not really feeling much better.

"Didn't you read the contract?"

"Yeah," I said warily. I hoped he didn't expect me to quote it word for word. Some of those words had been pretty big.

"The tests will not be invasive," he reminded me.

"If I knew what that meant," I muttered. What did I look like, a freaking dictionary?

"Invasive means aggressive," he explained patiently, "as in trying to harm. The tests will be non-invasive."

Which cut out everything that had happened to me at that chantry in Springfield. I hid a sigh of relief. "Okay, then I don't think that I would need you to hold my hand. Unless you wanted to," I added quickly. Part of me wanted him to be there for me, but mostly I didn't want him to see me jumping through hoops for his clan.

"I don't know what they're planning," he said again.

Gee, that made me feel so much better. Not. I would have said so, but Micky came up to us just then. Mac walked with us downstairs to the laboratory area of the chantry, but he didn't come in.

The first thing they did was send me into an examination room with Zora. She explained that she wanted to do a complete physical on me, including a stress test. I didn't like the sounds of that, but the physical didn't bother me. Not that I'd ever really had a full physical before, I'm not much for doctors, but it wasn't that bad.

She asked me a lot of questions though, about blood and how I'd learned to use it. I told her what Kate had taught me, how I could get faster, stronger, and heal myself instantly. She also asked about all my scars so I had to tell her where they'd come from, at least the ones I could remember.

When I got dressed in the change of clothes I'd brought and came out of the examination room, Brenda was waiting for me. She explained what would happen during the stress test, and made sure I had a drink of water before we began. I wasn't sure why she was being so nice, but I kept my words respectful and to a minimum. Mac would have been proud.

I got on the treadmill and started running. The first mile was easy, no incline, slow speed. I could have done that one all night. Gradually they sped the treadmill up and raised the incline to make it harder. By the tenth mile they had raised the machine as high as it could go and I was still keeping up. I knew I couldn't run like that all night, but I did go a couple of miles before Zora told Brenda to turn the machine off.

I waited impatiently for them to take off the damn sensors before I could walk around the room to slow my heart rate. And I couldn't figure out why Zora had stopped the test when she had, I wasn't even winded.

"How are you feeling?" she asked.

I shot her an amused look around the towel Brenda had given me to wipe the sweat from my face. "Like I just ran twelve miles."

"Tired?"

"I'm all right," I told her with a shrug. Even if I wasn't that's what I would have told her. You don't admit weakness to a vampire, they tend to take advantage of it. "I could have gone longer."

"That much is clear," she admitted. "However, there are a few other tests I'd like to run tonight."

Great. Brenda handed me a bottle of Gatorade and I drank it down before we moved into the weight room. For the next hour Zora took notes while Brenda stepped me through all of the machines. It actually felt pretty good to be using some of the muscles I hadn't used in a few days. If being a Tremere ghoull meant I had access to all this cool equipment, I could more than deal.

Some time around ten Jax brought me some food and a pot of coffee. He sat and talked to me for a bit while the vamps went off and compared notes. It was kinda nice talking to him again. He told me they planned on a sparring match between Mac and me, they were just waiting for him to come back from wherever he was. Apparently there was a little bit of a debate as to who would win. I wasn't too sure myself.

The thing was, I didn't want to hurt him, but I sure as hell didn't want him to hurt me. I hadn't seen him fight hand to hand in twenty years, I had no idea what I was in for. Still, I had to have faith in my own abilities. I'd kicked a lot of vampire ass over the years, but I didn't want to go into this overconfident either.

Once I was done eating, Micky and Mac came in. Micky explained that they did want us to spar, but neither of us was to do any permanent damage to the other. He also warned us not to use any blood to make ourselves faster or stronger, and that we weren't to use disciplines. It seemed simple enough; I'd done without the boost my blood gave in many fights. I just wasn't sure I wanted to fight Mac.

We moved out into the middle of the workout area, circling a little and watching each other warily. Mac tried to draw me into conversation, but I ignored him. I watched his eyes trying to read his intentions.

I got tired of the circling soon enough and tried a quick jab to see how he reacted. He tried to move away but he wasn't fast enough. I hit him in the jaw a lot harder than I meant to, but it didn't seem to faze him at all.

He moved in quickly with his elbow aimed for my face, but he must have miscalculated the distance. Or maybe he was trying to make me think he'd miscalculated it. I moved back a little and waited for his next move. It wasn't long in coming.

With a step and a spin, he thrust his leg toward my stomach. I blocked it and danced away again. He barreled toward me, trying to knock me off balance with his shoulder. I stepped away and drove my fist into the back of his shoulder. He spun quickly to keep me in sight and I knew I hadn't hurt him. I'd pulled the punch at the last moment without even thinking about it.

He moved in to grab me, but I stepped aside and punched him low in the back, near the kidneys. It wasn't a polite punch, but it was effective and I could see in his eyes that I'd stunned him. Still, he recovered more quickly than I could have believed if I hadn't hunted vamps more times than I could count.

He crouched a little, preparing to dodge my next move. This was getting old. I didn't want to hurt him, but I didn't want this fight to last all night, either. I shook my head even as I shifted my weight to kick him in the stomach. When he bent with the impact, I lifted my foot and kicked him in the face. That last impact I pulled a little; I really didn't want to hurt him. Once again he got that dazed look in his eye before he shook it off.

"You can cry 'uncle', you know," I told him softly.

He just gave me his usual cocky smile. "Never."

Fine with me. If he wanted to continue then continue we would. I spun quickly and lashed out with the back of my fist. I could have hit him a lot harder than I did, but I pulled it at the last minute. It looked like he never even felt it.

I grabbed his arm and turned to throw him over my shoulder. He landed a few feet away, but was back on his feet in an instant. I went in low to knock him off his feet, but he jumped straight up and over me.

Just after he hit the ground, my roundhouse kick landed solidly in his stomach. When he doubled over I was glad I'd pulled the impact a little. Why couldn't he just throw in the towel before I really hurt him?

"You could at least try to hit me," I hissed, trying to goad him into taking the offensive again. I couldn't keep hitting him if he didn't.

He stood there bent over with one hand on his knee and raised the other in the air. I breathed a sigh of relief that it was over, he was giving up. Of course, I couldn't let everyone else know how relieved I was.

"I can't believe you're giving up," I said loud enough for the others to hear. "We just got started."

He looked up at me and I could see hunger burning in his eyes. I stepped back to give him the room he needed to control himself. Micky stepped in with some blood packs and when he handed them to Mac I turned away. I wasn't being squeamish, really. It wasn't like I hadn't seen him feed before, I just didn't like knowing that I'd caused his hunger now.

I walked over to Jax and took the water bottle he was holding. He turned to the woman next to him and introduced her as Lydia, one of the other Tremere ghouls.

"You're good," she told me with a smile. "Who have you studied under?"

"Enemies," I told her simply, wiping the water from my mouth with the back of my hand. "Either you learn how to win, or you die."

She nodded like she knew exactly what I was talking about. "I'd like to see what you can do against one of us," she suggested, "using blood to pump. It might turn out differently."

I didn't see why the outcome would be any different, but, "If you'd like to give it a go, I'm willing," I offered. Better to get this competitive shit out of the way as soon as possible.

"I'll have to take you up on that some other time," she said softly. "Zora has things for me to do tonight. I'll see you around." She nodded at Jax and went off to talk to Zora.

When I watched her walk away I saw that Mac was still sucking down blood. I wasn't sure, but I thought he was on his third or fourth bag. I looked at Jax questioningly. "I thought we weren't supposed to use blood," I said softly. "Why does he need it so bad?"

"You hit him pretty good a couple of times," he reminded me. "Micky didn't say you couldn't heal, just that you couldn't boost."

I glanced back at Mac in surprise; I'd really tried not to hurt him.

"You pulled, didn't you?" Jax said, his voice sounding a little startled.

I looked back at him innocently. "What?"

"You did, didn't you?" He grinned. "Damn, you are good. Not too many of us ghouls could take down a Kindred of his generation without even trying."

"Not too many of you spent your lives killing vampires," I reminded him hoarsely, looking back at where Mac was just finishing his last bag of blood. "It's the only thing I'm good at."

"Isn't that why you're here?" Jax asked. "To take care of the clan's enemies?"

I shrugged. "I'm here to do whatever Mac tells me to." I gave him a polite smile and walked across the room toward Mac in time to hear Micky tell him we were done for the night. When we got back from Austria they wanted to do a few blood tests, but they didn't want to take it now in case there was trouble while we were gone. They also said something about doing IQ tests when we got back, which I really didn't like the sounds of.

I knew our next stop was Brenda's house and I didn't like that much either. Still, I had to go where Mac wanted me to now, didn't I?

He picked up on my nervousness as we were leaving the chantry. "Just follow the rules of the house," he suggested. "Remember that the sooner you behave, the sooner we can go back to the apartment."

"You mean the sooner I start trusting everyone the sooner we can leave?" I asked softly.

"Yes," he replied firmly.

I shook my head and looked away in disgust. "I guess we're going to be here a while," I muttered under my breath.

"As you wish," he told me.

I ignored that comment, but I made sure to be as respectful as I could when we got to the house. Everyone seemed to accept me okay, but I still didn't like the idea of staying there. I felt edgy but I wasn't sure why. It's not like I thought one of them would bite me or anything. When Mac was close to me it helped, but we weren't attached at the hip.

Some how I knew it was going to be a long time before we could move elsewhere.

AUSTRIA

AND ALL I CAN TASTE IS THIS MOMENT
AND ALL I CAN BREATHE IS YOUR LIFE
IRIS - Goo Goo Dolls

The next night everyone else left for Austria. We waited one more night so that we could meet Stephen at the airport in Paris.

"You remember my nephew, Brother Stephen," Mac prompted when the monk had joined us on the plane.

"Yeah, I remember him," I said with a smile. "Corrine sends her regards. She hopes that you can stop by and talk to her some time soon."

"I would enjoy that," he told me.

"She would too."

"Have you visited home?" Mac asked.

"No, I've been busy with the affairs of the pack," Stephen replied.

"How's Elijah?"

"Quite well," he said pleasantly. "He is recovered from his Wyrms taint fully and the last I heard he was traveling back towards Salem. Truthfully, as a side note, Elijah was instrumental in some of our pack affairs and he and I reconciled our differences. Indeed, he stood as my sponsor when I gained renown and advanced in rank."

Elijah was a werewolf who had been ghoulé to one of the Tremere. I'd heard he'd left town, but not why. I was willing to bet his master didn't like it much.

"Your grandmother and grandfather send their regards. They would like to see you when your schedule permits," Mac added softly.

"I would enjoy that greatly," the monk admitted.

They talked about the family for a while, and I left them to their conversation. I actually excused myself to go take a nap, knowing that I needed to be awake most of the day to oversee our travel to the holding.

The trip to the holding went smoothly, considering we were travelling in a horse drawn wagon for most of it. Mac was in a large box in the back, and our guide didn't speak English, but Stephen sat and talked with him most of the way in French. I stayed in the back with Mac trying to ignore the fact that the box looked like a coffin.

We got to the holding just before sundown and I helped Stephen and Mikael Provinof carry the box up to our room. Lena Stockton owned the holding, and Mikael was her boyfriend and father of her son. He was also Garou, and my strength seemed to impress him.

Mac woke up once the sun went down and together we got ready for the evening. The wedding wasn't until the next night, but there would be a party of sorts, and things to get ready for the ceremony, so it would be a busy night.

When we came downstairs, I recognized Nina from the picture Mac had shown me. As he led me across the room toward her, he warned me to be nice.

He really wasn't being fair. I'd been nice the last few days, ah, nights. What more did he expect from me? I looked up at him as innocently as I could even though the palm of my hand was itching for a stake.

"Bullshit," he murmured.

"When have I not been nice?" I demanded softly.

"Well, there was the one time," he drawled.

I rolled my eyes. "Is there a reason I should not be nice?"

"That is Nina," he said, as if that fact alone didn't make me want to stake her.

I knew I couldn't let jealousy get the best of me. If Mac had wanted to be with Nina, he'd have done it long before I'd seen him at Guilty Pleasures. We were together again and this time it was for good. I forced a bright smile and told myself to 'be nice'.

"Little one," Mac said affectionately as he let go of my hand and held his arms out to her.

"Mac," the woman said warmly. I watched silently while they hugged, wondering just how pissed he'd get if I staked her.

"Nina," he said when they finally pulled apart, "this is my... associate."

I studied her wondering just what Mac saw in her. She was pretty, but I didn't think that was it. She reminded me a little of Siofra, but I wasn't sure that was it either.

"You remember Eliza," Mac continued, taking my hand again. "Eliza, this is Nina Rodriguez."

I nodded, but I didn't trust myself to speak. This vamp was part of the 'personal matters' that Mac had kept from me in LA.

"So how's LA?" he asked her.

"Busy," she replied with an easy smile. "Is everyone getting excited over the wedding?"

"That's all Christina has talked about for a month now," he told her.

"How's Salem?"

He smiled and squeezed my hand. "Quite well."

Brenda joined us a few minutes later and after a bit of polite conversation, she brought our attention to Nina's jewelry.

"Oh, Nina, what beautiful earrings you have on," Brenda exclaimed.

"Yes, I've seen them before," Mac murmured.

I glanced at the woman and to my dismay she had on the exact same earrings I'd bought Corrine. I looked away and found something else to focus on. Eventually the topic dropped and I spent the rest of the night avoiding Nina.

Some time during the evening I noticed that Lena was looking longingly toward where the other women were decorating the hall. Mikael was off doing something with Stephen. Dealing with children and babies was something I missed from working at St. Stephen's, so I volunteered.

Lena was a little hesitant at first, but she let me take the baby. She kept a close eye on me for a while, but eventually she relaxed. For the rest of our stay at the holding I spent as much time with the baby as possible. It kept me away from the vamps, most of them don't deal well with children.

I'd thought it would be harder for me to adjust to being with a dozen or so vamps for as many days as we were there, but it wasn't so bad. Knowing that Mac was there for me if I got into trouble or if I needed a break from his friends made everything seem a lot better, even if it wasn't.

Yeah, I didn't like the way he and Nina got on, but there was nothing I could do about it. He'd been friends with her for a long time and it wasn't my place to say who he could and

couldn't talk to. I just kept thinking how nice it would be to stake her and get her out of my hair. Still, I managed to be 'nice', even though half the time my fingers were itching for a stake.

Mac seemed to understand my jealousy, but that didn't make him stay away from Nina. He kept telling me to be nice and I kept insisting I was. Eventually I made it a point to be elsewhere when they were talking together. It helped that Mac was with me every morning when dawn came, holding me while the sun came up.

We spent some time in the gardens of the holding too, walking hand in hand through the flowers and the bushes. It was nice to be together like that, it made me feel like together we could do anything.

The wedding itself went off without a hitch. There were a few pre-wedding glitches, mostly dealing with a mage from the bride's past. Apparently Siofra wasn't the only one who liked to mess with peoples' minds.

Christina was beautiful in her long white gown, and the way she looked at Jason made me forget my animosity toward the woman who could make Mac laugh. It was wicked obvious who her heart belonged to.

I found myself wondering what Mac and my wedding would have been like if the raids in Baltimore had never happened. All those years ago Mac had talked about having the ceremony at his parent's house, but he hadn't mentioned anything about getting married since we'd found each other again.

The reception was a little subdued since the bride's mage friend had made a little visit after the wedding. She made sure everyone stayed inside the holding and seemed on edge the whole night, but she also tried to make sure everyone had a good time.

The next night we stayed long enough for Stephen to christen the baby, then we headed for home. I knew I'd miss the baby, and Lena, but my place was with Mac. His life was mine now, and I knew I'd go wherever that led.

TROUBLED THOUGHTS

YOU CAN NEVER GO BACK

TO THE PLACE WHERE LOVE IS BLIND

SCENE OF A PERFECT CRIME - CONCRETE BLONDE

"You're not trying," Zora Yale said impatiently the night we got back to Salem.

I gave her an even look, struggling to keep a hold on my temper. "I'm doing the best I can," I told her. "I'm not good at this stuff." Hell, if I had my way, we wouldn't have been doing this shit at all.

"You're not stupid," she replied harshly. "Why do you insist on behaving like you are?"

For real now, a month ago I would have staked her for that remark. Now I knew that if I did that Mac would be very angry with me, and I didn't want that. I took a deep breath to try and calm down. "I'll try again."

I bent over the paper and tried to make sense of the words on it yet again.

Zora was only doing her job, after all. I'd agreed to go through this testing as part of my new contract with the Tremere, but for some reason I'd thought it would be mostly physical testing. I'm a lot better at the physical stuff, you know? Give me something to pummel and I'll beat it into the ground. Give me something to read and I'd just as soon walk away from it.

Actually, I would much rather have been with Mac taunting Kate than in this room taking tests. When we'd come to the chantry, he'd told me he was going to see my mother, but he wouldn't let me go with him.

"You have testing, remember?" he'd said firmly.

I'd shot him a disgruntled look from the corner of my eye. "Can't they just make me fight some more?" When he'd stopped and looked down at me sternly, I'd added, "What? I fight well, I don't test well."

He'd just stood there looking down at me and I'd known that there was no way I could get out of it.

"You know they're just gonna find out what we already know," I'd muttered with a sigh.

"What do we know?" he'd demanded.

"That I have a lot more brawn than brain." It was true so it didn't bother me to say that. I've never been one for book learning but I've always been quick to fix things with my fists.

"I think they want to find out the ratio though," he'd replied as he led me into the building.

"Gee, 100 to 1?"

"Now, now luv," he'd chastised me. When I'd raised my eyebrows at him, he laughed and gave me a quick hug.

So here I was in the basement of the chantry answering multiple choice questions about a dumb story that made no sense to me. The fact that I didn't want to be there didn't help my concentration much.

When Mac came into the room a little while later I was thrilled. I half hoped something bad had happened so I could go take my frustrations out on someone else.

"How are things going?" he asked softly with a knowing smirk on his face. "I'm not interrupting am I?"

"Not at all," Zora replied, obviously grateful for an excuse to stop the testing. "Actually I think we'd both do better with a break."

"For the evening or just a breather?" He glanced at the papers on the table in front of me. "I have some things that require us away from the chantry."

I slid the papers into a pile and laid the pencil down on top of them. "The evening would be good," I said hopefully.

Zora tried not to smile. "I have to agree."

"Very well." Mac nodded to Zora, then turned to me. "Come luv, we have work to do." As I stood up, he said his good-byes to Zora.

Once we got out of the room, I breathed a sigh of relief, which made Mac chuckle.

"Yeah, you laugh," I said dryly, "but you weren't the one going through a brain invasion." When he took my hand, I added, "So, what're we doing? Anything that requires kicking a little ass?" I could use some physical activity to get my mind back in order.

"Maybe eventually," he told me.

It sounded promising, anyway. "I can live with that. What are we doing?"

"We have some leads," he replied. "A locker key from the train station, and a bill from the Paradise Motel just south of town. I'd like to check both of them out tonight."

"What are we expecting to find?" I asked.

"Any clue that might help us find Linda," he told me. "Or that might convince the prince to let me kill her."

"Linda?"

"Yes."

That surprised me. "Why do you want to kill Linda?" Okay, so she'd never been the best 'mother', in fact she'd taken every opportunity she could to 'punish' me before Kate had stepped in and taken care of that problem. The thing is I knew that most of Linda's problem had stemmed from Kate, or rather her addiction to Kate's blood. How could I wish her dead, especially now that I was in the same boat?

"I don't," he began, then corrected himself. "Well, okay, I do, but we need to find her first. I want to convince the prince to let me kill Kate."

"First off, I thought I was gonna get to kill Kate," I said grimly. That was one head I was looking forward to separating from the body. "Second, why do you want to kill Linda? She never did anything to you."

He stopped and looked down at me sternly. "Kate's life is mine to decide how it ends and who ends it. The Prince decides when," he reminded me. "Linda is a threat at this point, there is no telling what she may do to help Kate." His face was hard, he was definitely in Cormac mode.

The harshness on his face bothered me even though I knew it shouldn't let it. I was his ghoulish after all, his servant, and we were in the Tremere chantry. The contract I'd willingly signed and the blood that I drank from him guaranteed that I'd obey him like a good puppy. But for real now, I didn't need him to remind me quite that way.

After a long moment, I looked away from the resolution in his eyes. "As you wish," I said softly. Now wasn't the time to argue with him.

He started walking again. "I never said I wouldn't let you kill her," he told me, his voice much softer now. "Of course I never said I would either."

It really didn't matter as long as Kate died by someone's hands. "Well, you're the boss, boss. Where to?"

"The train station," he said as we approached the stairs to the main floor. "I do have to make a stop at my room here, though. I have a ritual I'd like to perform."

"Do you mind if I get something to eat?" I asked him, knowing the ritual could take a while. "I could meet you up there."

"No problem." He squeezed my hand then let go.

I watched him until he was out of sight wondering why I had such a big problem with his wanting to kill Linda. She was supposed to have been my mother, you know? I wasn't sure that he could understand what that meant to me. I mean, I'd figured out pretty quickly that she wasn't really my mother, but still she was the only mother I'd ever known.

Shoving those thoughts to the back of my mind, I found the kitchen and got a quick sandwich. Someone had made a pot of coffee and I downed a large cup before I went to find Mac.

We left the chantry a little while later on his motorcycle. Halloween is Salem's biggest holiday, and this being October, there were decorations everywhere. The smell of autumn was heavy in the air, along with that of burning leaves.

It didn't take us long to get to the station. It was one of those small picturesque New England buildings that seemed to be everywhere in Salem. I'd been inside a few times before following one supernatural thing or another, but I'd never really stopped to take a look around.

Mac led the way over to the lockers and he quickly found the one that matched his key. It was one of the lower lockers, and he crouched in front of it to put the key in. It fit perfectly.

He opened the locker a little cautiously and I wondered just what he expected to find. Inside was a manila envelope that seemed a little bulky. He put his pack down on the floor and gently opened the envelope. I watched while keeping an eye out for anything that could be trouble.

From the envelope he pulled two sets of identification, one for Karen McBride, and the other for Lydia Gretzke. I didn't recognize the names, but the pictures were all too familiar: Kate and Linda. There was everything they could have needed in those packets, including birth certificates and drivers licenses. From what I saw, everything was from Florida.

The second thing he pulled from the envelope was a wad of cash wrapped with a rubber band. He flipped through it, and I could see that it was at least a couple of thousand dollars.

He reached into the envelope one more time and I wasn't really surprised when he pulled out a set of car keys and a ticket from a long-term car storage place in Boston. Kate wasn't one to forget details when it came to her own survival.

"1963 Dodge Charger," he murmured softly as he put everything back into the envelope. He shoved it into his backpack and closed the locker before standing to look down at me.

"Anything useful?" I asked.

"A few more names to give Micky," he told me. "We have some expense money to go looking for Linda now."

I nodded indifferently and shot a glance back at the waiting room. I couldn't find any enthusiasm for the hunt and I still couldn't understand why. Linda had hurt me many times, and there was every reason to believe that she'd do anything Kate asked of her. Didn't that mean she was a threat to Corrine?

Thinking about that made me bite the inside of my lip. If she really were a threat to Corrine, I'd kill her in a heartbeat. It didn't matter that Corrine didn't seem to want my protection, that she even resented it. My daughter was my first priority and that's the way it would always be for me, no matter how she felt about it.

For some reason my silence seemed to annoy Mac. He pulled out his phone and dialed the chantry to talk to Micky. I listened, as I normally do. Sometimes it's the only way for me to find out things about his life. He knows by now that if he doesn't want me to hear his conversation, he doesn't make the call with me in hearing distance.

He gave Micky the names from the ID and all the other pertinent information that went along with them. In return, Micky told Mac that Marie Prescott, one of Linda's alias', had showed up in Flint, Michigan by way of Toledo. The Flint Tremere chantry was checking into it, and Micky would call if they got any information on her.

Mac mentioned the car and said that he wanted to check it out as soon as we could, which Micky seemed to be okay with.

"Check it out when you have the time," he told Mac. "You don't want to be stuck in Boston come sunrise, too many Brujah. And don't worry about bringing Eliza back in for testing, we can do that any time. This is more important."

Wonderful. I was hoping to get out of it altogether, but of course I should have known better. Just call me Eliza Gentry, the Dhampyr guinea pig.

"I'd like someone from Caine Security to meet me at the hotel," Mac said thoughtfully.

Micky gave him the name of the head of the security team and the phone number to reach him at.

"What exactly does the clan want out of Kate?" Mac added. "Just so I know what else to be looking for answers to."

"We'd like to find this mystery ghoul," Micky replied. "And I know that Prudence told Eliza her father was dead, but given her track record, everything she says is suspect. If we can track down what really happened to him, that would be helpful."

That was something I refused to let myself even consider. As far as I was concerned, the man who'd impregnated Kate had died a long time ago. And even if he hadn't, anyone who would willingly leave a child with that monster didn't deserve to be acknowledged.

"Okay, I'll start asking her questions about that," Mac murmured into the phone.

"We'd also like to know how she lowered her generation," Micky said. "As you know, clan members come up missing from time to time and we'd like to make sure she wasn't the cause of any of them. If you can get any other alias', maybe she's got funds stashed out there we can reabsorb into the clan. I'm not sure what else Ford is looking for, I'll ask him and let you know."

"Does the clan require Linda alive?" Mac asked.

"We would like to question her, but it's not imperative," Micky replied. "She might be useful to get Kate to cooperate, if she knows we have her ghoul. If you have to kill her, do it."

"I understand," he said firmly, looking down at me. I knew he was telling me he'd follow Micky's orders and I understood that. We were both under clan control now, Mac because he was Tremere and me because I was his ghoul. I understood that better than he realized.

When Mac hung up with Micky, he immediately called Caine Security and arranged for someone to meet us at the motel. After he put his phone away he led the way out of the train station.

"Why don't you give Corrine a quick call," he suggested as we walked to the bike. "Just to say 'hi'."

I nodded and pulled out my cell phone, although deep down I was reluctant to call her. Corrine and I hadn't been getting along that well lately, mostly because I needed to learn how to control my big mouth. I'd totally offended her when I'd told her about breaking my old contract with the clan and now I didn't know what to say to make things right between us again.

It was just as well that she wasn't home. I left a message that we were back in town and that she could call us when she had time. I knew she'd be busy with school, which was just as well. Mac and I were quite occupied with clan stuff.

I got on the motorcycle behind Mac and we headed for the motel.

THE PARADISE MOTEL

I STARTED OUT CLEAN BUT I'M JADED

JUST PHONING IT IN

JUST BREAKING THE SKIN

BENT - MATCHBOX TWENTY

The Paradise motel was a bit of a dive, one of those low rent places that people who want to disappear end up in. I'd lived in a few of them myself over the years. This one looked like the last time it was painted was sometime in the late sixties. There were fifteen rooms available, and the lights in three of those rooms were on.

Bob, the guy from Caine Security, was there waiting for us along with an older woman he introduced as Marge. They told us that the room Kate had rented was on the end of the motel farthest from the road. He'd already talked to the night clerk, and cleared it with the manager to go in through the window of the room.

Marge was an explosives expert and Bob hoped that they could get in and diffuse the problem without any casualties. When Bob asked if we had any idea what they were looking for, Mac seemed a little vague.

"Something triggered by the door being opened," he replied. "I don't know for sure if it's a gun or a bomb."

"Okay, we'll try for the window, take our time," Bob told him confidently.

We stayed by the bike while the guy climbed carefully in through the window. He was out of sight for several minutes before coming back and gesturing us over. As he helped Marge inside, he told us that there was a device wired to the door and that it looked a little tricky. He thought it might take some time for the woman to defuse it.

Mac watched through the window, but it didn't really interest me. I found a car hood to sit on and kept my eye out for trouble while we waited, listening to Marge mumble to herself as she checked out the bomb.

While we waited, Mac told me that if the clan didn't come up with any leads on Linda that led out of Flint in the next few nights, we'd be flying there to check it out. He wanted to take Jax with us and I had no problem with that. Jax was one of the few ghouls I trusted. Mac wasn't sure if he wanted to take another Tremere or not.

Although he didn't come out and say so, I don't think he wanted to have to depend on any of the clan members in Flint. This was our problem, his and mine, and we needed to clean up our own mess.

After a while Marge told Bob that she thought she had it figured out, but she suggested we move away from the building just in case. Of course we did, and it felt like forever before she opened the door. She wiped the sweat from her forehead and waived to us, letting us know everything was clear.

Bob and Marge helped us go through the room, but there really wasn't a whole lot that was useful. It looked like someone had left quite suddenly several weeks ago, there was rotted food on the table next to the bed. There was some clothing scattered about, and jewelry in a dresser drawer.

I ran my hand across the jewelry, remembering some of it from my childhood. There were times when I was really young that Linda would play dress up with me and let me wear some

of her things. I didn't like remembering good things about her, it made it hard to think about killing her.

Mac found a small cosmetics case filled with ritual stuff that he tucked away in his pack. He also found something else that pissed me off to no end.

Apparently Kate had hired a private detective to keep an eye on Corrine and me when we moved to Salem. She had a shoe box half full of surveillance type photos of both of us here in town along with the detective's business card.

I couldn't believe the balls of the bitch to actually have hired a private detective to spy on Corrine and me. What the fuck was she thinking? Damn, there were pictures of me on the hunt at St. Stephen's. This guy could have blown the whole Masquerade, not to mention gotten both of us killed. I handed the box to Mac in disgust.

"We've gone through everything and the device on the door was the only mechanism they found," Bob told Mac when we'd gone through everything. "Do you need us to hang around?"

"No, we will be leaving shortly as well," Mac replied.

"Very good then. If you have any further need of us, please call." With that he nodded in my direction and left with Marge.

Mac spent a few minutes on the phone with Micky filling him in. Micky had heard of the private eye, but hadn't had any personal contact with him. He told Mac to keep him informed on what was going on and said he'd call if he heard anything more about Linda.

"At least you have something to put in a photo album now," I told Mac as he sat on the edge of the bed and started going through the box of pictures.

"Or Kate's wall," he murmured.

I didn't understand. "What about Kate's wall?"

"Well, I decided to decorate one of the walls of Kate's cell," he told me.

That was something I didn't like the sounds of. "What do you mean decorate?"

"I put up some pictures to remind her of us," he said without looking up.

"Is that why you've been taking all these pictures lately?" I asked. He'd been snapping them at every opportunity.

"Yes, it's working quite well."

"Is it?" He knew I didn't want Kate knowing anything about me, so he had to have a good reason. "Getting anywhere?"

"Pissing her off to no end," he said, sounding quite pleased.

I tried not to smile. "I guess I won't complain about it then."

"She's frenzied every time I've seen her," he added.

"I'm surprised she's got the blood left for that," I murmured. The clan had been holding her for three weeks and I couldn't see them keeping her at full levels.

"Frankly so is the clan," he admitted.

"Are you getting any information out of her?"

"Yes and no," he said reluctantly. "I'm getting partial information."

"Anything you believe?" Kate was known to lie, it was almost a religion with her.

"Not enough to form an opinion, really," he told me thoughtfully. "She told us about an apartment and where the key was, but the key is warded or something. In order for her to tell us how to open the box, and give us the address, she wants blood, warm blood."

"What, she expect you to throw somebody in there with her?" I couldn't see the clan doing that either, she'd probably kill whoever they gave her.

"Mmm, heat up a blood bag," he murmured.

I sat down on the only chair in the room and adjusted the knife in my boot. It was new and the fit wasn't quite the way I liked it. "That's probably not what she had in mind."

"Well, that's what she asked for."

"Are you going to give it to her?" I was hoping he'd say no.

"Micky has some of his people looking for the apartment to see if we can find it on our own," he replied. "It's supposed to be on Elm Street, but she neglected to say if it was here in town or in Philadelphia."

"What's supposed to be at this apartment?" I asked.

"We're not sure, I stopped while I was ahead, quite frankly." He was still looking through the box, stopping to pull out pictures every now and then.

"I'm honestly surprised she's even talking to you."

"Yes, well, so am I," he admitted. "And unless she starts cooperating more, her usefulness is going to be put to an end soon."

"Haven't they tried Dominate or something?" You'd think someone would have. Ford Radek would have been my choice, he was the lowest generation Tremere in the city.

"I think they did."

"I'm surprised she hasn't talked someone into letting her go." She'd always been good at getting herself out of bad situations.

He put the lid on the box of photos and put it in his ever-present backpack. "I'm the only one that's visiting her." He stood up and looked down at me.

"How'd you manage that one?"

He smiled. "I'm the only one that got anywhere with her. No one else has gotten any information out of her. She's fed during the day while she sleeps and I visit her once a week."

"Ah, poor Kate," I drawled with a huge grin on my face. "Locked in a room all by herself, seeing only you." She hated Mac with a passion, had tried to kill him more than once.

"And those pictures on the wall," he added almost gleefully.

"Maybe we should wait a while to kill her," I suggested.

"I was thinking that," he agreed. "Death would be too much of a release."

"Just let her sit there," I continued.

"Visit once a month," he added.

It would be bloody horrible for her, but thinking about it made me laugh. Kate deserved every bad thing that happened to her. Hell, I hoped that someday I'd be the last bad thing to happen to her.

THE PROPHECY

SOMETIMES I WISH TO GOD I DIDN'T KNOW NOW
THINGS I DIDN'T KNOW THEN
SOMETHING TO BELIEVE IN - POISON

"It's too late to go to Boston," Mac said when I finally stopped laughing. "We'll do it tomorrow. Did you have anything you wanted to do? And don't give me any of that 'as you wish shit'," he added dryly.

I raised my eyebrows at him, but I didn't deny that I'd been doing it without even thinking. Mac wanted me to be a companion, a lover, not a puppy. We both knew I had to pretend otherwise where the clan could see, but when we were alone he wanted me to be myself; argumentative, abrasive, and in love with him to the bottom of my soul.

"Not really," I told him, shrugging. "We can't kill Kate tonight, and we decided to wait anyway."

He nodded and pulled out his cell phone. "I need to call Glenn."

I was a little surprised at that. He hadn't mentioned Glenn in several nights, what could he possibly want from him?

"Are you busy this evening?" Mac asked when Glenn had answered the phone.

Glenn paused for a moment before replying. "Did you have something in mind?"

"I'd like to talk to you for a little bit if I could," Mac said softly. "Not over the phone. I have a few questions for you."

"What about?"

"Things," he replied. "The past."

"I suppose." I had to wonder about Glenn's reluctance.

"Well, don't go out of your way," Mac drawled.

"You were suppose to call me a few weeks ago," Glenn reminded him.

"You've been busy," he said softly. "The whole seeking thing."

Glenn had been involved with Corrine's first seeking, something I wasn't real comfortable with. Not that I had a real choice about it, now that Corrine had joined the many generations of Awakened mages in Mac's family, her life was way out of my hands.

"That was over a week ago," Glenn replied. "So you wanted to meet somewhere? I'm assuming you're not in Nashville." When Mac asked him to meet us in half an hour at the park behind Jester's, he asked if he should come alone.

"It doesn't matter," Mac told him calmly. "I'm just planning on talking."

I stood up when he was done. "What do you plan on asking Glenn about, if you don't mind my asking?"

"Mage things," he said vaguely.

"Oh." That cut me out altogether. There was a lot of things I could tell Mac about his past, but I couldn't tell him anything about his magic so I let it drop.

We left the motel and since I was hungry we stopped at a drive through for something quick. When we got to the park I sat down on a bench and ate while Mac stood close by and watched the park behind me.

It was almost two-thirty, so Jester's was just closing. There was a lot of noise from that direction, but it dropped off once most of the customers had driven off. A few minutes later I heard a sound that didn't match the rest of the night noises. When Mac looked in that direction, I knew he'd heard it too.

"Good evening Glenn," Mac said in greeting as the mage joined us.

"Mac, Eliza," Glenn replied.

I just nodded at him while I crumpled up the wrapper from my meal. I'd said everything I'd needed to say to Glenn the last time we'd seen him in Galway.

The mage looked at Mac. "What can I do for you?"

"Well, what can you tell me about this... prophecy I've been dreaming about?" His tone was almost scornful, as if he didn't trust his memories about the subject.

Glenn seemed surprised. "You've been dreaming about the prophecy?"

I glanced between the two of them, not really clear on what they were talking about. Neither of them had ever mentioned any prophecy around me before.

"The prophecy," Mac replied disdainfully, "destiny, whatever."

The mage seemed a little amused. "Mac, you've never believed in fate."

"I still don't," he said quite seriously.

Glenn shrugged. "So what's it matter?"

"Just filling in the gaps," Mac replied.

With an unreadable glance at me, Glenn started speaking in French, a language neither Mac nor I knew. I actually didn't know anything but English, but Mac was trying to teach me Latin and German.

"I don't speak French," Mac interrupted.

Glenn looked at him in mock surprise. "You never learned it?"

"No." Mac was starting to get irritated, but he was hiding it well.

"You know, my mother wrote most of her prophecies in French," the mage said softly.

"So I've been told."

"It's quite interesting if you just believed in fate."

"In English, please," Mac repeated firmly.

The way he kept glancing my way, it was obvious that Glenn didn't want me to hear the prophecy. I just looked back at him calmly; there was no way he was getting rid of me. Finally he sighed and nodded at Mac.

"'The Raven's son shall travel to a New World seeking peace but death shall seek him out'," Glenn said softly. It was almost as if he were reading from a book and not liking the material. "'Death will walk within him and he shall know neither family nor friend nor himself.'

"'From a union with joyous rage a maiden shall be formed. She will be the tie that binds, the voice that redeems. Joy will keep her from harm and watch her grow.'" At that he glanced again at me.

"'In time the son shall again find joy and she will lead him to the maiden, and he shall save her from the bite of death.'" He continued. "'Through joy he shall remember that which has been forgotten.'"

His face softened a little. "'And the maiden shall be the hope of the New World. She shall be of her father's race but she shall bring salvation to her mother's people. She shall be the tie

that binds, the voice that redeems. She shall bring reason in the face of insanity, love in the face of hate, peace in the face of war."

When he was done, everything was quiet for several long minutes. I spent the time wondering just what the hell the whole thing was supposed to mean.

"Who all put stock in this... prophecy," Mac asked, his voice low.

"My mother was a known seer," Glenn told him. "Everyone who believed in destiny put faith in her abilities. Why?"

"I've had a few dreams about it in the past week or so," Mac admitted, surprising me. "Did Siofra believe in the prophecy?"

"She didn't use to."

"At what point did she start?"

"Well I think she might have started a little earlier if it had appeared that more of the prophecy had happened," Glenn answered dryly. "But since you were supposedly dead and there was apparently no child, that kind of blew the prophecy."

"Did she believe in it when she had my sire killed?" Mac demanded.

Of course his attitude brought Glenn's defenses up. "You'd have to ask her that." When Mac looked expectantly into the darkness behind Glenn, the mage added, "Oh, she chose not to come with me."

"Ask her for me then," he suggested.

"Is there a reason you can't ask her?" I got the feeling this was something Glenn didn't want to be caught in the middle of.

"She's not here and I don't have her number," Mac replied coolly. When Glenn gave it to him, he asked if she was awake.

"She was when I left her." The mage looked closely at his brother-in-law. "You're not planning on upsetting her again, are you?"

"When did I upset her?"

"She told me she was going to 'visit' you and ask why you hadn't called about the—" He stopped and shot another glance at me before continuing. "—things that we talked about. When she came back she was rather upset and wouldn't discuss it with me."

Of course that made me wonder what they'd talked about that Glenn didn't think I needed to know.

"Maybe she felt it was none of your business," Mac suggested.

"It's possible," he admitted reluctantly.

"If your own wife won't tell you, it's certainly not my place."

Glenn shrugged, but I could tell he was disappointed. "I'd just rather not see her upset like that again."

Mac shifted a little impatiently. "Not to go all schoolyard, but she did start it."

"And what exactly did she start?" Glenn demanded.

He sighed heavily. "Being a Brennan."

That made Glenn smile. "And you're holding that against her? She's just following a family tradition."

"Siofra was being unreasonable," Mac told him, "on more than a few points."

He chuckled. "Not Siofra," he said dryly. When Mac didn't seem to appreciate the humor, he added, "Being unreasonable on more than a few points, that sounds like my wife."

"I'm sure you can certainly see where it was not entirely my fault she was upset," Mac replied. "I'm sure you've dealt with her a few times."

"Yeah, I've dealt with her quite often over the last few years," he admitted fondly.

Mac nodded. "I just wanted to know about the prophecy, who believed it and when and what not."

"Well, apparently the vamps believed it enough to kill her," Glenn said in a voice that was hard and sad at the same time. "Although not necessarily over that prophecy."

"So what was in the box?" Mac asked suddenly.

"The box?"

"The one I brought you when I came to Baltimore," he prompted.

Glenn looked away. "It wasn't actually what was in the box, but the message my mother embedded in it. It was something she'd left for me with your father." The mage glanced over at me. "Did you still want to do that, ah, what we talked about?"

"No," Mac replied firmly. "It hasn't been a problem."

Glenn nodded. "If you change your mind..."

"Good night, Glenn. Thank you for coming."

"Good night." He turned and gave me a long disappointed look, one that told me he knew that I was Mac's ghoul. To my surprise he didn't say anything, he just turned and walked off into the darkness.

I listened until I couldn't hear him anymore, then I turned to Mac. "Why didn't you tell me about that twenty years ago?" I wasn't trying to accuse him of anything, I just wasn't sure if I should believe all the prophecy nonsense.

"I didn't believe in it then either," he said softly, looking after Glenn.

"I think your parents did," I told him. "Your father said some things I didn't understand until now. And he was arguing with Glenn about it."

He turned to look at me. "About what part?"

"Who was supposed to take care of the 'maiden' and how Glenn was supposed to be watching out for her," I replied. I still wasn't sure how he was supposed to have done that. "Your dad wasn't too happy that Glenn hadn't told them about us."

"I believe they think Corrine to be this 'maiden'," he murmured.

"That's what her name means, but I sure as hell didn't know that when I named her," I told him absently. I looked after Glenn wondering how much of what he'd said I was supposed to believe. I didn't want to believe any of it, it was too cruel to think that Glenn might have known what was going to happen twenty years ago and not told me about it.

"Do you think it means anything, Mac?" I asked him softly, hoping he'd tell me he didn't. "Was shit supposed to go down the way it did?"

"I do not, nor did I ever put any faith in destiny," he told me firmly.

I studied his face in the dim light for a moment, then nodded and looked down.

BOSTON

YOU NEVER DID NOTICE BUT YOU STILL HIDE AWAY
THE ANGER OF ANGELS WHO WON'T RETURN
EVERYTHING YOU WANT - VERTICAL HORIZONS

Before I could ask anything else about Glenn's visit, Mac's phone rang. It was Micky.

"I heard from Pittsburgh," he said. "There is an apartment on Elm Street registered to a Lydia Gretzke. A few blocks away on Eight Avenue there is a bartender that recognized the photos of Linda and Prudence, although she knows them by Lydia and Karen." He went on to say that the bar was not a Kindred hangout that Lydia normally went into the bar at least a couple of times a week.

"When would be the last time she saw her?" Mac asked.

"Prior to Prudence being incarcerated." Prudence was what Kate was known by here in Salem. It also happened to be my middle name.

"Ahh, it's been some time then," he murmured.

"Well, it's been some time since she's gone to the bar, but not necessarily since she's been to the apartment," Micky told him. "They did talk to some of the neighbors and they saw her the day before the picture we have was taken."

"Did the city's Tremere investigate the apartment or are they retaining that honor for me?" he asked softly.

"Well, they are watching the apartment," Micky replied. "It appears to be empty and they want to know if we want them to wait or if they can just go in."

"Empty or vacated?"

"Empty, the curtains are still up."

Mac thought for a moment before asking, "Would it be possible for us to get a flight up there?"

"That would be no problem," he replied. "When?"

"Tonight. I have several hours before sunrise."

"I have to make a couple of phone calls," Micky said thoughtfully, "but I don't see why not. I'm sure we can get a flight out either before sunrise or shortly after."

"There are a few things we can check out in Boston tonight."

Micky seemed to approve of that idea. "I can make it for after sunrise, it'll give us a little more lead-time on the flight plan."

"I'd like to check out the apartment while we're in Boston," Mac said after he hung up the phone.

"The one I found Kate at?" I asked. "Do you think we'll find anything?" I tossed the remains of my meal in a nearby trash container and walked toward the bike.

He shrugged as we got on it. "It's worth a shot."

We went back to the Bathori Mansion for clothes before heading to Boston. Christina and Jason were still on their honeymoon along with Frasier, her ghoul. Brenda and Rafe were elsewhere, something I was really grateful for. I still felt really uncomfortable around them.

I still had my reservations about moving into a house full of vamps and Mac didn't like that at all. We'd argued about it again on the way back from Austria, and I could still hear Mac's lecture echoing in my ears.

"You're part of the 'family' now," he'd told me, meaning the Tremere clan. "You need to get to know the people who live here and they need to get to know you."

When I'd protested that I knew them well enough to avoid them in the middle of a fight, he'd just gotten more irritated with me.

"You need to learn to *trust* them," he'd said harshly, "and they need to learn to trust you. You need to learn to respect them, and they need to learn to respect you." He'd taken a moment to calm down a little, then taken my hand. "Nobody has to like anybody else, but I think you should know, trust, and respect each other."

I didn't understand how he expected me to be able to trust them. Sometimes I think he forgot that I'd spent my entire life hating vamps and their ghouls. I'd been burned by their kind so many times I doubted I'd ever be able to trust them. Then I'd remembered that Mac was a vamp, and now I was his ghoul.

"I'll try," I'd told him honestly. There was nothing else I could do.

Mac managed to get us into the apartment by telling one of the residents he was a cop. Once we got in, he made sure the woman stayed in her apartment and we went upstairs. Someone had repaired the door, but it only took me a minute to pick the lock. I'd picked up more than one trick working for the Society of Leopold.

Once I got the lock, Mac gently pushed me to the side of the door. He eased the door open, but there were no sounds coming from inside of the dark apartment. He flipped on the light and we went inside.

Someone had made the effort to clean up the bloodstains I'd left behind, but other than that the room looked much the same as it had three weeks ago when I'd hit first Kate then Gerome through the heart with a crossbow quarrel.

I walked over to the window where I'd ended my friend's life to save Mac. There was still a hole in the window frame where the quarrel had gone through him and embedded in the wood. For a moment I could see him pinned there, the crossbow he'd been holding falling from his dead hand to the floor. I shook my morbid thoughts away and went to help Mac search the apartment.

We really didn't find a whole lot, just some bills and a lease agreement signed a year ago to Kate Hepburn. There was no food, no clothing, not even any supplies for the rituals the Tremere put so much stock in.

The phone bill showed calls to two different numbers in Pittsburgh and of course Mac tried to call them. He got no answer at the first number, but the second one showed up something interesting. The voice mail list of associates at the investment firm had the name 'Lydia Prescott' listed as one of the investment assistants.

My number was listed on the bill and so was one in Bar Harbor that I didn't recognize. Mac put the bill into the same pocket he kept his cell phone.

The long-term automotive storage facility was only a couple of miles from the apartment. We got there around three o'clock to find the clerk engrossed in a comic book. He didn't even look up until Mac revved the engine of the bike, and then he barely took the time to run the ticket through his computer before opening the gate for us and going back to his reading.

The parking garage was fairly large but there were a lot of empty spaces between cars. We followed the signs on the wall to a subbasement and the space Kate had rented.

The car had Florida plates and a current registration to Karen McBride. The title was even in the glove box, signed but not dated. It started on the first try and sounded fast.

"1963 Dodge Charger," Mac murmured as he walked around the car. "Good condition, V8 4-on-the-floor, dual pipes, holly headers, full tank of gas, and dangly dice."

"So do we get to keep this one?" I asked hopefully. I really liked the car, it was sharp.

He looked over at me in surprise. "Which one didn't we keep?"

I grinned. "The piece of shit van." It had been burned with a body in it to make the Society believe I was dead.

"Did you want the piece of shit van?"

"Not really," I admitted, "but something to drive around in would be really nice. The title's signed and everything."

He bent down to examine the tires. "You haven't been acting like you were ever going to leave my side," he drawled softly.

"You sleep all day," I reminded him.

"The 'as you wish' bull shit," he added.

I tried not to smile. "You like the 'as you wish' bull shit."

He looked over the hood of the car at me. "Not really," he said firmly.

"Really? 'Cause you wouldn't know by the way you take it and don't say anything." Not that I'd been doing it on purpose, I just had a lot on my mind.

"If you want to act the puppy," he told me harshly, "you're going to get treated like one."

There wasn't a whole lot I could say to that one so I changed the subject. "Do we get to keep the car?"

"I don't see why we wouldn't," he replied, "unless the clan comes up with an extreme need for 1963 Dodge Charger in good condition with a V8 engine, 4-on-the-floor, dual pipes, holly headers, full tank of gas, and dangly dice."

"Micky'd probably like it," I reminded him. Micky had a taste for sleeper cars like this one, although his looked a lot worse and was probably a lot faster.

"Micky already has a car," Mac said with a smile. "And two sets of keys."

We took the car with us when we left for the airport and left it in the long-term parking lot. Jax was waiting for us with the prince's plane. He helped us get our things on board and told us that Lydia would be joining us before dawn. Then he went the cockpit to get the plane ready to take off at dawn. Since that was still a couple of hours away, Mac and I sat down in the main cabin to relax for a little while.

PERSONAL MATTERS

OH, NOW, WE TOOK IT WAY TOO FAR
ONLY LOVE CAN SAVE US NOW
I ALONE - LIVE

Something Glenn had said was weighing on my mind and I knew I had to ask Mac about it. I really didn't expect him to answer me, he'd been pretty abrasive the last time I'd asked him a personal question. I couldn't really blame him for that, he wasn't willing to tell me things about his past when I'd been so stubborn about keeping mine from him.

Things were different now, but we still hadn't talked about it. I was his ghoul and that pretty much meant he owned me, didn't it? I mean he could talk all he wanted about not wanting a puppy, but when it came down to it I had to do what he said no matter what I thought or felt about it.

"What 'things' was Glenn talking about when he said he thought you were going to call him?" I asked softly.

He laughed dryly and grinned. "Personal matters."

This time I knew exactly what he wasn't saying. "Nina."

"She would have been involved," he admitted, "in a round about way."

"Which means you don't want to tell me about it."

"The 'things' were unnecessary," he told me simply, "so they were not done."

"Look, if you don't want to tell me about it, just say so." He didn't have to dance around it like that.

"I don't want to tell you."

Yeah, whatever. "And you bitch that I don't want to talk about my past," I muttered under my breath.

"This isn't my past, luv," he reminded me.

I was going to let the subject drop, but he smiled sweetly at me and it pissed me off. Fair was fair, you know? How did he expect me to tell him about stuff if he didn't tell me anything?

"How is you not talking about your present any different than me not talking about my past?" I demanded, keeping a tight rein on my temper.

"Why don't you tell me how it is different?" he shot back. "Since you expect me to talk about myself when you won't talk about yourself."

"I told you, pick a year," I growled.

"Start with 1980," he suggested.

"I was living in Bar Harbor, you know that," I reminded him angrily. "I lived with the Wrights until after Corrine was born, then I moved into town and started hunting." I'd hunted blood-sucking fiends like Mac for ten years to keep them away from my daughter.

"Tell me about Luther."

I shot him a wary look, not quite sure what to say. I'd known that he'd heard about me killing Luther, I just didn't know how much he knew, or rather how much he thought he knew about it. "What about him?"

"You tell me," he demanded obstinately.

I looked him straight in the eye and said with no regrets, "He's dead."

That irritated him. "Before that."

"Before that he was the regent in Burlington," I told him, as if he didn't already know. "He didn't like me." The feeling had been more than mutual.

Mac sighed and stopped dancing around the subject. "Why did you kill him?"

I ran a hand across my eyes hoping to put off answering the question. I didn't want to tell him the whole truth, but I wasn't about to lie to him either. I settled for something in between. "It was a society hit," I said truthfully, "I couldn't stop it."

I could feel his eyes on me but I didn't look up. Just thinking about those two nights Luther had held me in his power made me want to kill him again. I was afraid that Mac wouldn't understand why I'd killed him, that he would blame me for it somehow. Luther had told me over and over that it was my fault that he had to punish me, and I couldn't help but believe him.

"Did you even try to stop the hit, or let the Kindred know?" he asked harshly. "Or did you feed his name to the society?"

I hated that he knew me so well. "I couldn't stop it, Mac." That much at least was the whole truth.

He must have believed it because he sighed in relief. "What did he do to you?" he asked softly.

My shoulders were knotting up so bad it was giving me a headache. I looked down at my hands and wondered how I could explain the things that Luther and his puppies had done to me and still expect Mac to love me. I didn't want to tell him everything, but I couldn't lie to him either.

"Things I could never let him do again," I breathed hoarsely. I would never have survived a second go at it with my mind intact.

He moved closer and pulled me into his arms. "I'm sorry," he said softly.

"I couldn't stop the hit because I'd started it," I whispered fiercely, putting my arms around his waist. "He deserved it. I'd do it again if I could."

"You won't have to though," he reminded me. "I would never hurt you." He laughed a little and rubbed his jaw ruefully. "We all know that much."

I had to laugh too, remembering our fight. "I tried not to hurt you," I admitted. I cuddled into his shoulder, glad he wasn't going to press me for details about what Luther had done.

He smiled fondly at me. "You failed."

At least he didn't resent my winning. "I'm not used to pulling my punches," I reminded him. "That kind of thing gets you dead."

He nodded. "Fair is fair. You answered one of mine, ask a question of your own."

I nodded and went for the hard one, the one I didn't think he'd give me. "Okay. What's the big secrecy about Nina?"

He pulled away from me and sat forward on the couch looking down for a moment. "I am two-thirds blood bonded to her."

That was the last thing I'd expected him to say and it was worse than what I'd figured. Kindred blood doesn't affect me that way so the only frame of reference I had was the way Linda had been when I was young. Kate's blood had made Linda adore her, do anything she asked. A blood bond was not something to take lightly, even if it was only a two-thirds bond.

"Why?"

"Both times saved my life," he told me, watching me from the corner of his eye. "She only remembers once."

This was bad, really bad. I'd been jealous of Nina before, but now I knew I had a reason to be. "So what does this mean?"

"I would give or do almost anything if she asked," he admitted, turning to look at me.

My first instinct was to offer to kill her for him. Mac had told me once that killing the blood donor was the only sure way to break the bond, but I didn't think he'd appreciate the offer. But I sure as hell didn't like knowing she had a hold over the man I loved.

"What has she asked for?" I asked, the tightness of my voice giving away the emotions spinning through my mind.

"She has never asked for anything I would not have done willingly, sans the bond," he said firmly.

Of course he'd think that way, he was bonded to her. He'd never think she was doing anything wrong. But wait a minute, didn't Glenn say something about breaking bonds?

"Didn't Glenn say he knew a way to break it?" I asked Mac.

"It would require her blood," he told me. Then he gave me a sharp look as if he knew I was about to say I'd get it for him. "Willingly."

"You don't think she'd give it to you?" If she was as good a friend as he seemed to think, she would. "You could make her forget she did."

"I did the first time, I didn't know her." He seemed a little uncomfortable talking about it. "I nearly drained her," he admitted reluctantly.

It must have been bad, Mac always seemed to have control of his hunger. "What happened?" I asked softly.

"The first or second time?"

"Either," I told him. "Both."

"The first was a Hunter raid," he said quietly. "Neither Nina nor her sire were carrying firearms, but I was. Her sire was knocked out. She had only been embraced a month and the only thing she could think of was to help me come to." He shook his head sadly. "She didn't know I was the worse off."

He seemed to be expecting me to say something and I was betting 'let's go kill her' wasn't it. I settled for something else. "So she offered to feed you?"

"She didn't offer," he said gravely. "She just slit her wrist and forced it to my lips."

That was blunt and to the point. I didn't like the picture it stuck in my head; I didn't want anyone feeding Mac but me. "Oh."

"Like I said, she was Kindred only a month."

"So she didn't know anything about blood bonds?" I asked softly. "Or was she trying to tie you to her?"

"She didn't know yet," he told me. "I made her forget."

"But she did the second time."

"Brujah," he said grimly. "I was taken. I was out of it. She fed me to revive me. She didn't remember the first step and risked the bond. That was six months ago," he continued softly.

"Yeah, I'm sure she felt it was a big risk," I bit out. If she knew about the bond then I was sure she was just using his injuries as an excuse to tie him to her. Damn, I knew I should have staked her when we saw her in Austria.

"It was an acceptable risk to save a friend," he chided me.

I knew there was nothing I could say to make him think any differently. "If you say so," I said neutrally. "I don't know her."

He grinned. "You would be surprised who is bonded to whom within the clan."

"Would I?" Vamps were ruthless for the most part. I could see them using anything in their power to be the strongest, but Mac wouldn't want to hear that.

"You might be."

"Try me," I said dryly. It would take a lot to surprise me about anything the Tremere clan did.

He just shook his head. "Tell me about the years before you met me."

"Which ones?" I asked, hiding a smile. "There are about thirty of them."

"The highlights," he said with a shrug.

I laid my head against the back of the couch. "What, like from the beginning?"

"Sure."

"Okay, highlights." I nodded and took a deep breath. There was a lot of ground to cover if I was going to tell him everything, even if I stuck to the highlights. I closed my eyes and thought back as far as I could.

"I remember living in Boston when I was really little," I told him. "Kate used to come and read stories to me when there were storms coming in off the harbor." She'd made me feel safe. "Linda used to do nice things sometimes. She'd make cookies and we'd watch TV until midnight. I remember stringing popcorn for the Christmas tree."

I opened my eyes to see if he was listening, and of course he was. He was watching me closely, almost as if he was expecting me to stop at any moment. I wasn't going to though; things were a lot different between us now. He knew the worst things about me and loved me anyway so there was no reason not to tell him about my past.

"Things changed a lot after I saw her feeding from Kate," I told him simply, the emotion draining from my words. "Linda was meaner after that, and I didn't talk to Kate for a long time. Linda used to tell Kate that I got into fights and stuff to explain the bruises, but I didn't really start fighting until I was twelve or thirteen."

Linda had given me those bruises, she'd hated that I wouldn't talk to Kate, wouldn't have anything to do with the vamp that was my mother. "When we lived in New York Kate found out what was going on and made sure Linda didn't leave any more bruises."

"What did she do?" he asked softly.

I shrugged. At the time I hadn't really cared what Kate did to Linda as long as the beatings stopped. "I assume she Dominated her. I didn't see it; I was trying to bring the swelling down."

He nodded and I went on. "I told you about the guy in Pittsburgh." The one I'd killed during my first frenzy. That was when I found out that I was damned for what Kate was.

"Yes."

"I think Kate fed me that night," I admitted reluctantly. I could almost taste her blood on my tongue. "I'd cut myself pretty badly, I probably would have died." I'd wanted to die but Kate had licked the slashes on my wrists closed.

He made a sound that might have been anything, but was probably disgust. I ignored it.

"We moved to Atlantic City after that. Linda didn't want to go but we didn't really have a choice." I'd had to take care of her there, my 'mother' had really gone over the edge in a lot of ways. "I remember her teaching me how to drive, Linda that is. She was real patient, it was surprising." She'd taught me how to drive only because she was drinking so much that she couldn't do it herself half the time.

"She used to drive me to school every day," I told him. "Sometimes on the way home we'd stop for dinner at different places around town. Of course, sometimes she'd forget to pick me up and I'd have to find a ride." I never knew what to expect from day to day. It really depended on how much Linda had been drinking.

"When I got expelled I left. It was too weird going to school with kids who didn't know vamps were real." I looked at him, hoping he'd understand what I was saying. "They lived the good life, you know? I couldn't stand it." It was bad enough that I was a monster, seeing their charmed lives was too much for me.

"I went to Charleston and hooked up with this guy there, Eddie Lane," I said sadly. "He was rich and he lived one big party. Kate found me and I'm pretty sure she killed him." He'd disappeared after a fight with her.

"I moved around for a while after that, but in Atlanta I learned a few fighting tricks from a biker gang."

"Like?"

"How to throw things," I said with a shrug. "How to fight dirty."

He laughed a little at that.

"I really didn't think Kate would look for me with them. A year or so later a Kindred joined up with them and when he tried to bite me, I killed him." I laughed dryly. "My first vamp kill, it freaked me out. I left after that. I tried to live a normal life in a little town in South Carolina, but that didn't work out. Not that I really thought it would." I'm not meant for a normal life, never have been.

"What happened?" he asked.

"Nothing big there," I admitted. "I roomed with a girl for a while, but she moved her boyfriend in and there wasn't room for all three of us. When I moved to Raleigh I couldn't find a job for a while. The shelters were crowded with families and it wasn't that cold out so I lived where I could."

He nodded to show he understood that I'd been living on the streets.

"There were a lot of vamps in Raleigh, and a big ol' church with an Inquisition priest running it," I told him with a half smile. "He watched me kill a vamp... ire that tried to bite me and started paying me bounties for helping them out." I really had to stop calling them vamps, I knew Mac didn't like it, considering he was one.

"They weren't real picky about what was killed, but I was." I smiled at him wryly. "Not everything that looks like a black hat is." He was a good example of that, and he smiled back at me.

"I was working in a bar when I met my first werewolf. He thought I was a p-" I was going to say puppy, but that was another word he really didn't approve of. "-ghoul and didn't believe me when I told him I wasn't."

"It's your aura," he reminded me. It was a lot lighter than most human's and made it look like I'd been ghoul'd a long time.

"It's probably worse now, isn't it?" I asked with a smile.

He shrugged. "A little lighter."

"Well, I can't get mad anymore for people thinking that about me since it's true."

"Now," he said, laughing. It had really only been a couple of weeks since I'd agreed to be his ghoul.

I watched him for a moment, thankful to have this second chance with him. It was something I'd never expected to get when I'd thought he was dead. "Are you getting bored yet?"

"No," he answered firmly. "Why?"

"Just checking." I didn't find my life interesting, but then again I knew the whole story. I hid a sigh before I went on. "Raven-Runs-the-Night saved me from the Ronin and took me to live with his pack in Lynchburg."

At that his interest peaked. Not many outsiders ever got to live with werewolves.

"I learned how to fight Garou there and mess with plants," I told him, and he grinned.

"They didn't like me, but I owed him, you know?" Raven had saved me and I'd owed him my life. "I helped them kill vamps and grow food. Those were the only things I was ever good at."

He gave me a warm look at that, and chuckled. I figured he was thinking of the one other thing I was good at. He kept grinning and I decided to ignore him; there would be time enough for that later.

"For some reason Raven thought the pack would eventually accept me, but they didn't so he let me go. I moved to Richmond." Even saying the name of the town made me sad.

"I met this girl there, and we became friends. She was the first girl I really got to know. She met a vampire and wouldn't listen when I tried to tell her he was bad news." I managed only a slight hesitation that time. "I guess I should have kept my mouth shut."

"What happened?" he asked.

I looked away. "He killed her and tried to talk me into taking her place. I killed him."

"Oh."

For the first time I really thought about what I'd been saying. "Is that starting to sound like a theme?" I asked softly, looking down at my hands. "'I killed him?'"

"Yes," he said gently.

I'd spent way too many years of my life killing things. Maybe if I'd done things differently, chosen different ways to handle things besides going for the kill my life would have turned out different. Then again, maybe I never would have met Mac or had Corrine. How could I regret the two best things in my life?

"After that I moved to Baltimore," I told him quietly.

He smiled in anticipation.

"I met Glenn when he saw me beat up a homeless guy who tried to get too friendly." At least that was one I hadn't killed. "He called me a ghoul and I hit him."

That made him laugh, but I didn't understand why.

"Then he tried to work magic on me and I hit him again," I added.

He laughed even harder at that and I had to smile.

"He told me he could help me and I told him I didn't need that kind of help."

Mac snickered a little, but I ignored him. I'd been wrong about Glenn.

"He told me to ask around and I did," I continued, even though Mac had known this part of the story once. "He took in all kinds of kids that had 'weird' shit going on in their lives. He found a lot of mages, helped them find mentors in their traditions."

"Yes, I remember that," he told me.

"He helped a lot of people," I said softly. I still hoped that he and Glenn could become friends again.

"Yes he did," Mac admitted.

I wasn't going to push the issue. "I lived at the brownstone for a while, then I found a job and an apartment."

"And...?" he prompted softly.

I smiled. "And then I turned around in the Memphis to see you sitting there and everything changed."

He put his arm around me and I laid my head on his shoulder. "And that's about the it." End of story.

I felt his lips on my temple. "Thank you," he whispered. He made it sound like I'd given him something special.

"Now you tell me everything that happened before you met me," I said, hiding my smile against his chest.

"I will," he told me, "just as soon as I remember it all."

I laughed and snuggled in a little closer. He'd get his memory back sooner or later and I could wait for it. "Your turn," I insisted. He had twenty years of memories he could share.

"What would you like to know?"

"Tell me what you and Siofra were arguing about that upset her so much," I suggested.

"You."

I looked up at him in surprise. "Me? I didn't know she cared."

"She didn't," he told me. "I did."

"I don't want to be a reason for you to fight with your family," I said seriously, looking away. "You used to talk about them sometimes and I know you really loved your sister."

"I still do," he replied, "but my perception has changed."

"How?"

"She thought you had no right wanting revenge on Dougal."

If Dougal wasn't already dead, I'd be more than happy to send him on his way to final death regardless of what Siofra thought. I knew Mac wouldn't want to hear that, Dougal had been his closest friend for a long time.

"Why?" I asked.

"You weren't 'family'," he said dryly.

I could tell he didn't agree with her, but for once he was wrong. "I'm not."

"Yes you are," he insisted.

Mac's father had tried to tell me I was too, but I couldn't agree. Just because Mac and I wore matching wedding rings it didn't mean I was family, we weren't married and never had been. I sighed and looked down. "No, I'm not."

He pulled me in for a hug. "You are the mother of my child," he reminded me. "If that isn't family enough..."

"Being Corrine's biological mother doesn't make me family, Mac," I told him simply. "It makes me... I'm not sure what it makes me, but she's right."

He sighed heavily and rubbed his cheek against my hair. "Next subject," he said firmly.

That was fine with me. "So what's in store for Pittsburgh?"

"Check out the apartment, the bar, whatever else turns up," he replied.

"You want me to wait for you to get up or can I do some checking when I wake up?" The plane was supposed to take off just after sunrise, but we'd be in Pittsburgh by nine. I'd be up by three or four and I didn't want to sit on the plane all day. I don't like being cooped up.

"If you must go off the plane, I would prefer you were with Jax or Lydia," he told me. "And stay together."

"Okay, if you insist." He knew I could take care of myself and I didn't think he didn't trust me, but I didn't like the idea of being on a leash. "I work better alone, though."

"I don't want to run the risk of you getting recognized," he replied firmly.

"It's been thirty-five years," I reminded him.

"And Linda may still be in town," he said.

I probably would have argued with him about it, but Lydia showed up. Mac and I sat up when she came in, and soon after we went into the back to get ready for sunrise. I fell asleep in his arms thanking the powers that be for another night with him.

A VISIT TO PITTSBURGH

WALKING DOWN THE STREET

DISTANT MEMORIES ARE BURIED IN THE PAST FOREVER

WINDS OF CHANGE - SCORPIONS

I got up around three when I heard movement in the main cabin. I threw on some clothes and went out to find Linda and Jax talking quietly. She asked me if I wanted to go into the airport for something to eat and I agreed. Jax said he would stay with the plane as long as we brought him back some food.

We found a decent place to eat in the airport and sat down with our food. I didn't know Lydia that well, so it was kind of weird to be eating with her, especially when she started asking questions I didn't want to answer.

"So this ghoul we're looking for is your mother?" she asked.

"Not really," I told her uncomfortably. "More of a foster mother. She raised me."

She studied my face closely. "Is that going to be a problem?"

I didn't like her tone. "What do you mean?"

"When we take her," she explained. "Is your relationship with her going to get in the way if we have to use force to get her?"

"Why would it?" I asked in a low voice. My temper had started a slow burn and I had a hard time bringing it under control.

"If there's going to be a problem you need to tell me," she said earnestly. "I don't want to have to go through you to do my job."

"My job is to do what Cormac tells me to," I told her bluntly. I didn't think Mac would like it if I bitch slapped her in the middle of the airport. I'd promised him I'd behave and that didn't mean beating up on all the other puppies. "You do your job and stay out of my way."

She must have realized I was getting irritated. "Look, don't take this the wrong way or anything, but I've been around a lot longer than you or your master," she said, her voice low and hard. "You might be able to take him down without even trying, but you don't want to mess with me."

"No, I don't," I replied honestly, finally bringing my temper under control. I could see her point, really. If I decided to throw a wrench in things, it'd be damn hard for them to go through me to get the job done. "I just want to get Linda and go home."

That seemed good enough for her. "Fair enough."

"Don't take this the wrong way, but maybe when we get back to Salem we can test your theory," I told her with a cool smile.

She didn't get it. "My theory?"

"That you can take me down."

Her smile matched mine. "You don't think I can?"

I shrugged. "I think it'd be interesting to see who winds up on top."

Mac had asked me to call the rest of the numbers from Kate's phone bill, and I did that while I waited for him to wake up. Then I just sat and counted the minutes until the sun went down.

He turned and looked for me when he woke up, and when I smiled, he grinned. "Good morning."

I laughed softly. "Good evening."

"Anything happen while I was out?" he asked as he got up and started getting dressed.

"Nothing of major interest," I said as I watched him. "I called the numbers that you told me to. Still no answer on that one here in Pittsburgh but one of the numbers was a condo manager in Tampa. I don't know who the one in Bar Harbor was, the woman said her name was Felicity Dumas. I called Martina but she didn't know her either."

"Well, there's nothing we can do to check on it right now," he told me. "Are you ready to go?"

"Yeah, they're waiting on us." I stood up and went to him for a hug and a kiss before we joined the others.

Micky had somehow cleared it with the prince of Pittsburgh that we didn't have to visit him as long as we didn't stay longer than one night so we went straight to the apartment. Jax had rented a four-door sedan for us and he drove through the streets like he'd been there before.

The city hadn't changed that much from what I remembered. For a while I thought we were headed to the neighborhood I used to live in, but we didn't go that far into town. Still, I remembered some of the houses and businesses from a long time ago, and it made me sad.

I'd made my first kill in Pittsburgh, and found out exactly what I was because of it. I mean, the guy had tried to hurt me, but I shouldn't have killed him, you know? But the beast inside me had taken over and I'd lost control. Kate had sat me down and explained things to me, but my life had changed that day forever.

When we got to the apartment building, one of the local Tremere ghouls was waiting for us. He introduced himself as Bob and told us he'd gotten the key from the manager. The building was in a rundown neighborhood and there were no security locks on the outside door. The apartment was on the third floor.

"We've been kind of impatient to get inside," Bob said as he gave Mac the key.

"Let us delay no longer," he replied, sliding the key in the lock. He opened the door cautiously and when we didn't hear anything from inside he turned on the lights.

It was pretty obvious that whoever lived here had left with no intention of coming back. Anything of value was gone, along with most of the personal stuff people usually have lying around. Lydia found some bills with Marie Prescott's name on them, but nothing important.

The apartment had two bedrooms and one of them was almost empty. The door to the other one was locked, but Mac forced it open. It had been used as an office, but the spot where the computer had once been was empty.

Mac walked right to a small hinged box with a strange Chinese design painted on it. He opened it slowly and pulled out a lock of dark hair tied with a pink ribbon. He looked at it for a moment, then held it up to my hair. The color was an almost perfect match. He put it back and took out a picture before giving the box to me. Inside were small fingernail clippings from a child, probably me.

"That's disgusting," I muttered. How could that woman have kept this stuff all these years? What the hell had she been using it for?

Mac looked at the picture for a long time before giving it to me. I looked at it, but I didn't recognize the guy. It was an older picture though, probably from the fifties.

"Tom Pennick," he muttered.

"Who?"

"Tom Pennick." He turned the picture in my hands to show me that name written on the back. "Do you know the name?"

"I've never heard it before," I said honestly. I'd never seen the picture either. "Who is this supposed to be?"

He handed me some pictures of me as a kid and asked Jax if the name or the photo of the man was familiar. It wasn't.

In a desk drawer, Mac found a large box of pictures. He looked through them before handing the box to me rather stiffly, and I could tell he was pissed.

"We have more pictures for the photo album?" I asked dryly.

"Yes," he replied coolly. "I'm in there."

That certainly I got my attention. I sat down in the room's one chair with the box on my lap and started glancing through them. They were all surveillance photos taken of Corrine, Mac and me, and all of them were taken before Corrine had moved to Salem. It didn't take me long to realize that the pictures went back to the early eighties, even those of Mac.

I didn't like it. I didn't like knowing that Kate had kept tabs on all of us and never once told me that Mac was alive. If I could have gotten my hands on her in that moment I would have killed her and to hell with what the clan wanted.

A few minutes later Mac decided that we'd found everything we were going to. We took everything that was important with us, and I looked forward to going through that box.

THE EIGHTH STREET BAR

SHE TAKES WHAT SHE GETS
AND SHE NEVER DID FLINCH
ARGUE - MATCHBOX TWENTY

After we piled everything we were taking in the trunk of the car, Bob led the way to the bar in his dark sedan. It was a working class bar and Thursday just happened to be Ladies night. It wasn't very crowded and it was kinda quiet when we walked in. I breathed a sigh of relief that there were no vamps inside, well, none except Mac.

Bob pointed out the bartender and told Mac that she was the one who'd recognized Linda and Kate's pictures. She was an older lady, late forties maybe, with graying hair and glasses. Mac walked over to where she was wiping the bar off. I followed behind him silently.

"Excuse me ma'am," he said politely.

She looked up. "Can I help you?"

"I was wondering if you've seen Lydia Gretzke in the past few nights," he asked her.

"I haven't seen her in a week or so," she replied, glancing behind Mac to where I was standing.

"Did she happen to say where she was going?"

"No, actually," she told him hesitantly. "I can't remember the last time I saw her, do you know her?"

"I'm a friend of a friend," he replied. "Do you happen to have any way to get a hold of her?"

She thought for a moment, then nodded. "I know her, do you want me to try and call her?"

"At the apartment here in town?"

"I think so, yeah."

Mac shook his head. "We've already tried there."

When she didn't say anything more, he thanked her for her time and led me over to where the others had found a table.

"She knows more than she's letting on," he murmured as we sat down.

"You think?"

"I'm pretty sure of it," he drawled.

"What are you going to do about it?" I asked softly, waiving a hand between us. "Tell me?"

He shook his head. "I don't think that will work."

Before I could ask why, the waitress came over to the table. Mac ordered a pot of coffee for me and a scotch on the rocks for himself. The others told her what they wanted and went off to get it.

Mac wasn't real subtle sitting there staring at the bartender. She was keeping an eye on us too but doing a better job of not looking like she was. She seemed nervous and I had to admit that Mac was probably right about her hiding something.

Bob told us that the local Tremere had found the investment corporation where Linda had worked, but that she'd been missing for over a month and no one had heard from her. All

signs pointed to her leaving town quite abruptly, which was something we'd already figured out.

Our drinks came and the longer we sat there, the clumsier the bartender got. Mac noticed it too.

"We're unnerving her," he murmured. "Outstanding."

"Maybe if you didn't stare," I told him.

He just smiled. A moment later a pyramid of glasses fell down when the bartender walked by them. She looked around as if she wasn't sure what had just happened before bending to clean up the mess.

"We'll be leaving soon," Mac said as he picked up his glass and stood.

He walked over the bar and sat the glass on the edge closest to the bartender. She'd been bending down, and when she straightened and saw him there, she jumped a little.

"Do you need another drink?" she asked him.

"No, we're leaving soon," he replied. "I was wondering if you had remembered anything else."

"Like what?"

"Any other numbers," he suggested. "Anything that might help me get in contact with her."

"Why do you want to contact her?" She looked suspicious.

"She's been missing for a month," he told her.

"Really? Is she family?"

"A close friend of the family," he said.

The bartender glanced over at our table for a moment, probably wondering which one of us was family. "I have a number I can try if you'd like," she admitted at last.

"If you would."

"You got a name so I can tell her who's looking for her?"

"I am a friend of Kate's," he said dryly.

She didn't seem to recognize the name. "Okay, give me a minute, I gotta clean this mess up." She went into the back room for a broom and spent several minutes cleaning up the glass on the floor. When she was done she walked over to the phone at the end of the bar.

Mac glanced back at me and I took that as a hint to try and listen to the conversation. The bartender dialed a long distance number and a moment later, Linda answered. I recognized her voice.

The bartender told her that someone was looking for her, and when Linda asked for it she started giving her descriptions of all of us. I moved a little to the side when she looked at our table, just enough to be out of her line of sight. I didn't want Linda knowing I was looking for her.

"Can you get rid of them?" Linda asked urgently. "I really don't want them to know where I am."

The bartender agreed, and they didn't talk for much longer after that. She went back to Mac and lied. "I tried this number and she's not there, I don't know how to get a hold of her. But if I do hear from her, do you have a number I can give her?"

"No, we'll be in touch," he replied.

"Well, if I hear from her I'll let you know," she said smoothly.

"Don't *forget*," he told her firmly, looking directly into her eyes.

She looked at him blankly for a moment, then glanced down at his glass. "Did you want another drink?"

"No thank you," he told her. He threw some money down on the bar and led the rest of us outside.

Mac thanked Bob for helping us and the ghoul assured him that they'd be keeping an eye out for Linda. We went back to the plane and got ready for take off.

Once we were in the air, Mac called Micky and gave him Tom Pennick's name. Micky didn't recognize it, and asked Mac to fax him a copy of the picture, which he did. They also talked about the other things we'd found in the apartment.

FLINT

HOW MANY TIMES HAVE I FELT DISEASED?

NOTHING IN MY LIFE IS FREE

FREAK ON A LEASH - KORN

Mac asked Jax to call the Flint chantry, and when he'd put the plane on autopilot, he let us know what they'd said.

Apparently they'd seen a woman in Flint matching Linda's description, although they didn't know where she was staying. She'd been seen at Bally's during the day, but she hadn't been seen after dark and she was avoiding businesses with known Kindred affiliations.

When we got to Flint, Mac told me to dress nice for our visit with the prince.

"Define 'dress nice,'" I drawled.

"Better than break and enterish."

I found something that he approved of, and the four of us went to the prince's house.

It was a beautiful house, but not as big or as impressive as the Tremere chantry in Salem. I still felt uncomfortable the whole time. It was one thing to be in Salem's chantry where I knew all the vamps, here I felt like I had enemies everywhere I turned. A tall black Kindred led us into the study and Mac talked a few minutes with the prince.

He was an older man with a strong English accent. Lydia seemed pretty impressed with the vamp, but I didn't see the attraction. He went over the city's rules with Mac and dismissed us.

The Flint chantry was just down the street. A female ghoul greeted us at the door and took us in to see Falcon, the regent. He and Mac did the whole small talk thing for a couple of minutes, then Falcon asked if Mac knew where to look for Linda.

They figured out that the best place to start was Bally's computer system. Dakota, one of the city's Tremere, was good with computers and Mac gave them all the names we had for Linda. Dakota told them it would take about twenty minutes to find out anything, and the ghoul showed us to our room.

We were given the master bedroom of the house and it was pretty nice with a large bed. When we'd put our bags down, the ghoul offered to get me and the other humans something to eat so we went down to the kitchen with her.

I felt more than uncomfortable there. Jax and Lydia had known each other for decades, and I was betting that the house ghoul here, Lauren, had been a puppy long before I was born. They knew the rules and what ones not to break, I had to watch everything I did and said.

When Mac joined us a half an hour later, the first thing I noticed was that he'd shaved off the goatee he'd grown in Ireland. I was surprised and pleased, but of course I couldn't say anything in front of everyone else.

Mac told us they had an address where Linda may be staying and that he wanted to drive by the house. I was a little skeptical, it didn't seem likely that we'd find her this easily.

We drove slowly through the neighborhood and found the house pretty quickly. It was a nice neighborhood; all of the yards seemed well taken care of. Jax went around the block then parked with the lights off down the street where we could still see most of the house.

Three weren't any cars in the driveway so Lydia volunteered to go look in the window of garage to see if she could get a license plate number. She was gone about fifteen minutes, and when she came back she had two numbers for Mac.

He called Dakota with them, but she said it might take a little while because the state's computers were usually slow getting into. She told him she'd call as soon as she had something.

Mac looked at the house for a few minutes before he pulled out his phone again and dialed a number from memory. I heard it ring on the other end twice before a light came on at the back of the house and a sleepy sounding woman answered. I didn't recognize the voice.

"Is Prudence there?" Mac asked.

"Who is this?" She sounded confused.

"Tom."

"I think you have a wrong number," she told him firmly. "I don't know a Prudence."

"I'm sorry," he said before hanging up.

We watched another light go on in the house, then a third. A few minutes later all the lights went off one at a time. We couldn't really see anyone moving around, but it looked like there was only one person in the house.

In the dimness of the streetlight I could see Mac start to grin.

"I see that look on your face," I said softly. "What are you thinking?"

"Did you see the light that came on?" he asked me.

"Yeah."

"Go stand by it, tell me who you see." When I hesitated, he added, "You are the only one that can positively identify Linda."

He was right about that. I nodded and got out of the car, closing the door as quietly as I could. I slid into the shadows and made my way down the sidewalk to the house. It was too easy to slip around to the window I'd seen the light in.

Right after I got into place, the phone rang and the light came back on. I saw a woman reach for the phone but when she answered it, no one was there. She sat up for a moment and brushed her hair out of her face. It was Natasha Gretzke, the woman in the photo Dakota had given Mac.

I was getting ready to go back to the car when I noticed a picture on her dresser. It was of the woman sitting with Linda, and it looked like a family pose. Who the hell was this woman?

Natasha turned the light off and I made my way back to the car.

"It's the girl in the picture," I told Mac once I got inside. "I didn't see anybody else, but there was a picture of her and Linda together on the dresser."

He thought for a moment. "We'll just have to have the house staked out, for now."

I tried not to smile. "You mean with actual stakes?"

He shot me a disgusted look at that, and I had a hard time not laughing.

SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

AND SOMETHING SOMEWHERE THAT YOU SAID
GOES RICOCHET ALL THROUGH MY HEAD
DAYS AND DAYS - CONCRETE BLONDE

Mac told Jax to take us back to the chantry and let both him and Lydia know that we wouldn't need them for the rest of the night. Lydia mumbled something about visiting a friend and after they dropped us off they left.

We went back to the room we'd been given, and to my irritation he decided we needed to work on my language skills.

"Why do I need to know Latin again?" I asked impatiently.

"Because all the Tremere speak it," he reminded me.

"I'm not Tremere," I muttered.

"It always helps to have a second or third language," he told me.

"I have a hard enough time with English," I protested.

"Latin is easier than it looks," he assured me. "I could teach you Gaelic, or Spanish if you prefer."

"Need I remind you that I'm not the academic type?" School was never my strong point unless fighting counts.

"Perhaps now is the time to start," he said firmly.

I watched him pull a tall yellow candle out of his bag and set it up on the floor near the bed. He told me to sit down by the candle and to stare at the flame. It took me a few minutes to get settled, I'm into doing more active things than watching a candle burn.

"Sit still, relax," he told me softly. "Focus on the flame and the sound of my voice."

"Don't we have better things to do?" I asked restlessly. I could think of one or two things I'd rather be doing.

"Be quiet," he continued patiently. "Focus your conscious on the white flame and push everything else out except the sound of my voice."

I let him talk me into a calmer state, but it wasn't easy. It felt like hours went by, but when he told me I could get up the clock showed it had really only been half an hour. I stretched gratefully and rolled to my feet.

I thought we were done, but he sat down where I'd been and started meditating himself. I went to my luggage and pulled out my staking supplies. I laid the towel down carefully on the floor to catch the shavings and sat down across from Mac to wait for him to come back.

A few minutes later he opened his eyes and looked at me. "Linda's not at the house."

For a minute I thought I heard him wrong. "What are you talking about?"

"Linda, she's not staying at the house," he told me. "She's at some dive motel."

"And you know this because... she called and told you when you were meditating?" I asked dryly.

"In a way," he said softly as he leaned forward to blow the candle out. "I saw her."

"Is that like the mind walk thing that Glenn does or the dreamwalk thing that Siofra does?"

"Similar I believe," he admitted as he got up to put the candle away.

Fucking magic. "So it's something I'm never going to understand."

"I don't think ghouls can learn powers that high."

"Would they want to?" I've always found that a little bit of muscle and intimidation took care of magic most of the time.

"It's a useful power," he chastised me. "How do you think I knew about the bomb on the door at the last motel?"

I shrugged. "I figured it was a vision you got from something in the locker." He could get visions from touching things.

"No, I didn't touch anything in the locker."

"You took everything out of the locker," I reminded him.

"No, I didn't 'touch' anything in there," he repeated. "I didn't receive any visions from anything there."

"Did you get the address?"

"The dreams aren't that specific, unfortunately," he admitted. "They're a little vague. But she's not at the house, she's a dive motel."

"That sounds like Linda," I murmured.

"I'm going to go speak with Falcon for a moment on this," he said as turned for the door. "Are you staying or are you going with me?"

"Am I invited?"

He gave an exaggerated sigh and said, "No," before laughing.

"Okay," I said, playing right along. "I guess I'm staying here then."

"Are you coming or not?" he asked, smiling at me.

"Yes," I told him, getting up. "But you know, it's a strange house, I don't know where the puppies are allowed."

He didn't bother to answer that one, just led me back into the living room where Falcon was reading a newspaper.

"I have reason to believe that the ghoul we are looking for is staying at a dive motel," Mac informed him.

"There are a lot of dive motels in Flint," he replied with a wry smile. "Can you be a little bit more specific?"

"Unfortunately, no."

"We did hear back on license plates," Falcon said. "They are both registered to Natasha Gretzke."

"Are we showing any relatives for her?" Mac asked. "A next of kin or emergency contact?"

The regent called Dakota to see if she had, and a few minutes later she brought us a print out of her DMV report.

Mac took it and had only just begun to read when he swore softly and handed it to me. I looked at it, but didn't see what had upset him until he pointed it out to me. Lydia Gretzke was listed as Natasha's next of kin, her mother.

I looked up in surprise, wondering if it could be true.

"Where does Natasha work?" Mac asked softly.

"Tuar Grimbac," Dakota told him. "Just south of town."

He asked Dakota to check for a Tom Pennick in the area, then thanked them both and led me back to our bedroom. "Perhaps someone should follow her tomorrow," he said thoughtfully

as he sat down in a chair. "Perhaps someone with some persuasive abilities." He shot me a knowing look.

"You want me to go follow her?"

"Oh, would you?"

"And if Linda shows up?" I demanded.

"Well, you would take Jax and Lydia as back up," he told me. "I'm sure the three of you can handle it."

I shrugged. "Probably."

He rubbed his chin ruefully. "There is no probably about it."

It was hard not to smile, but I managed. "Okay, we'll follow her."

Micky called as we were getting ready for bed. He'd had people looking for evidence on Tom Pennick and they'd come up with some rather interesting information.

Although there were many Tom Pennicks on the East Coast, they thought they had it narrowed down to one particular guy who'd lived in Portland, Maine from 1927-1949 because Kathleen McGuire had lived there too. He'd dropped out of sight and never shown up in Maine again.

There were a few other strange bits of information that turned up; Tom Pennick rented an apartment in Boston in 1958, worked for the City of New York from 1962-1964, died in Atlantic City in 1967, and worked for a construction company in New Jersey in 1975-1979. They couldn't tie those findings to any Tom Pennick with a concrete history, but they were still looking.

"Who is this guy?" I asked when he'd hung up. None of it made any sense to me.

"When were you born?"

"September 6th, 1951," I replied. It was the truth as far as I knew it.

"In Portland?"

"I have no idea," I told him dryly. "You know, I was there, but I don't remember. Why?"

He gave me a somber look. "All indications point toward this gentleman your father."

"But Kate said that my father was dead," I said with a frown. Then I thought about what I'd just said. "Okay, first two words negate the rest of that sentence, but..." Could my father really be alive? I didn't like thinking that anyone would willingly leave a child in Kate's hands.

He fell asleep soon after that, and I was left to think about my father in silence. If Tom Pennick was my father, I wondered if he even knew I existed, or if Kate had kept me from him. I hoped he hadn't known about me, I would hate to think that he would have willingly left me with a lunatic like Linda.

An hour or so after I fell asleep, the sound of a phone ringing woke me up. I reached out blindly and found my cell phone. "Hello?"

"Eliza?"

"Corrine?" I rubbed a hand across my eyes and sat up in the darkness.

"Did I wake you up?" she asked

"Yeah but that's okay," I assured her.

"Oh, I can call you back later."

"No, that's fine," I said, leaning back against the headboard. "What time is it?"

"About eight thirty."

Two hours sleep. I'd lived on less. "What's up?"

"I just got your message and I wanted to call you back," she told me.

I stifled a yawn and wondered why she'd only gotten the message just now, I'd left it just before sundown. "Did you come in last night?"

"Yeah, you could say that," she replied evasively. "So you're in Pittsburgh?"

"Actually we're in Flint, Michigan," I told her.

"Just the globe trotter now, aren't you?" she teased.

"I guess." It wasn't as fun as she made it sound. "We're following some leads on Kate's friend. It's actually the woman I told you about that raised me."

"Uh-huh."

"We're pretty sure that she's somewhere in town so we're trying to find her."

"So how's it going?" she asked.

"Busy. How are things going with you?"

"Great, just great. I'm doing a lot of studying with Jared, we set up three days a week basically to do some stuff. I participated in my first ritual with the coven Sunday and that went really well. I'm doing really good."

She told me she was spending time with Samantha and Brian, and that she'd had brunch with their family a few days ago. It sounded like she was getting pretty close to Brian, something I wasn't real sure I liked. Don't get me wrong, I wanted her happy, I just didn't want to see her hurt.

Then she told me she was taking him home for the end of season festival this weekend. I really didn't know what to say.

"You're taking Brian home with you?"

"Yes," she told me. "Oh and he will be using the spare bedroom, that was made quite clear."

That sounded very serious. I didn't want to pry, the last time we'd talked things had still been very awkward between us. I figured my best bet was to change the subject.

"We're hoping to find Linda tonight," I said softly. "Hopefully we can be home tonight or maybe tomorrow night sometime."

"Well if not, we are planning on leaving after I meet with Jared," she told me. "We've changed our session to Friday and Brian took the whole weekend off, I would imagine we're leaving around three o'clock. I'll probably go straight to his house after meeting with Jared and take a shower there or something."

Shower there. Definitely serious. I hoped Mac wouldn't freak out about it. "So if we get back really late, I can stay up a little longer and we can have breakfast."

"That's a good idea," she replied warmly. "That would be nice."

I breathed a silent sigh of relief. "I'd like that. And maybe if we get back early enough we can visit."

"Just call me," she said. "And it's not like I have to get up early on Friday or anything."

We didn't talk for too much longer, and once I hung up the phone I laid back down to sleep.

I got up around eleven and found Jax and Lydia ready to go relieve the chantry's ghouls in following Natasha. They offered to take me with them and I agreed, figuring I'd take a bus or a taxi back to the chantry before the sun went down.

It was strange watching Natasha on her lunch hour. She went shopping for a little while before sitting down to eat, and her life just seemed so normal. I wondered if she had any inkling about what Linda really was, if she knew about Kate or what she was too.

INFORMATION

I THINK I'M JUST SCARED THAT I KNOW TOO MUCH
I CAN'T RELATE AND THAT'S A PROBLEM I'M FEELING
IF YOU'RE GONE - MATCHBOX TWENTY

Hours later I sat in a chair near the bed with my knees drawn up and waited for the sun to go down. Mac had asked me a few weeks ago to try and be in the room with him when he woke up every night, but I still wasn't quite used to watching life come back to his body.

After what seemed like forever he woke up and looked around the room. "Good morning," he said when his eyes found me.

"Good evening," I corrected him with a smile, as I did every night.

"What news?" he asked as he sat up.

I told him about my day as he got dressed and armed himself for the night. He smiled when I told him about Corrine's call, and he was very interested to hear about the taps on Natasha's phone and e-mail.

"Have they managed to get a hold of her phone bill for the last week or so?"

"Yes, they did." I'd talked to Falcon's ghoul when I'd come back and I told Mac the places she'd been calling. They were mostly work and take-out food places, but one of the numbers was a day care center on the West Side of Flint.

"The Happy Elephant Day Care Center?" he murmured thoughtfully. "Hmm, I didn't think about that."

"About what," I asked. "That she might have a kid?"

"Yes."

Hell, most people had kids once they got married so it really didn't surprise me. "They might have more information now that everyone is up," I reminded him.

"How is Linda getting around?" he said thoughtfully as he strapped on his guns. "There are no records of a vehicle."

"Not for Linda."

"Not for any of her known aliases," he added.

"That doesn't mean she doesn't have another one, or didn't buy one since she got into town." Gaia only knew what name she was using now.

"Remind me to ask Dakota to pull the rental car records for that day," he told me. "Possibly even car dealerships. Of course she may have had one in storage."

When we entered the living room a few minutes later, Falcon was just coming in from the kitchen holding a piece of paper.

"Ah, good morning," he greeted Mac. "Sleep well?"

"Yes," Mac replied. "Good morning."

See, if I'd have asked that question, I'd have gotten a smart-ass remark.

Falcon held the paper out to Mac. "Dakota gave me this report just before I came upstairs, I thought you might find it interesting."

Mac spent several long minutes reading the report before glancing up at me. "When were you in Atlantic City?"

I shrugged. "Sixty-seven, sixty-eight maybe."

He sat down on the nearest chair and went back to reading the paper in his hands.

"Can you make sense of any of that?" Falcon asked.

"Catarina is a form of Kate, Slavic I believe," he murmured.

"Yes it is," Falcon replied as he sat down across from Mac.

"It reeks of Kate's handiwork," he said firmly. "The birth records are not registered, transcripts from before Atlantic City are not registered."

Falcon nodded. "It's almost as if she didn't exist."

Mac glanced at me again. "Yes, like a few people we know. Does this Chaney gentleman still live in the area?"

"I believe he lives in Mt. Morris," he replied.

"Did you happen to look at Natasha's aura?" Mac asked me.

"Yeah."

"And? Was it pale?"

"No, it was human," I told him. "Are you thinking she's ghouled?"

"I'm thinking she's like you," he replied softly.

That surprised me, and by the looks of things it surprised Falcon too. "Not by her aura," I said slowly. I would have thought if she was Dhampyr, a half-vampire, it would have shown up as a light aura like mine did.

"Did we get any useful information from any of the other useful inquiries?" Mac asked the primogen.

"We've been keeping an eye on Natasha since last night," Falcon told him. He went on to say that they'd found an Internet account and were monitoring all of her e-mails. They'd gotten one from Mr. Chaney that told them Tommy would be with his mother tonight.

They also checked into a license for Lydia Gretzke, but there was no Michigan license for her. The rental company said that she had a Virginia license, which listed Karen McBride as her sister. The phone number given was Kate's cell phone, and the address was the hotel in Salem. They were unable to identify any credit card activity for any known aliases, but sometimes Falcon added that credit card computers were difficult to get into.

"Of course," Mac murmured.

"Your motorcycle is now here at the house if you'd like to use it," Falcon told him. "Do you need any assistance? I could send a couple of house ghouls with you if you'd like."

"Yes, I'm planning on taking a bit more aggressive means of finding her," Mac replied.

"Just let me know where and when," he said. "The other ghouls who had accompanied you are following Ms. Gretzke at the Genesee Valley Center, it's not far from here."

"Shall we take a trip?" Mac asked me.

"Of course," I replied with a smile.

On our way to the bike, Mac called Jax to find out where they had parked at the mall. It didn't take very long for us to drive there, and we managed to park near the rental car.

Once inside we made our way to the center court of the mall and stood near an island vendor looking at crystal fairies while we waited for Natasha to show up. About ten minutes later she did, holding the hand of a five-year-old boy. Jax and Lydia weren't far behind.

Natasha and the boy walked past us toward Hudson's, and we trailed after them followed by the ghouls. She went into one of the stores that sold children's clothes and Mac guided me

into the store next door that carried my size. It also happened to be connected to the store Natasha had gone in to. Jax and Lydia went into a store across the hall.

Mac waited until they were looking at clothes for the boy before he called her cell phone. He pretended to be a state cop and said that a car had been found in Pittsburgh that was registered to her mother.

"Can you reach her and have her give me a call at the station?" he asked politely. "She should have my number." When Natasha asked for it anyway, he gave her his old cell phone number.

When they hung up, Mac called the chantry and asked them to trace the next few calls to and from her phone, if they could. Natasha took her son by the hand and led him out into the main hallway of the mall. They sat down on one of the benches and she took out her phone to make a call.

We 'shopped', keeping an eye on her for the next ten minutes, anxiously waiting for her phone to ring. When it didn't, the boy started to get restless. Natasha called the same number again and within a few minutes her phone finally rang.

"Natasha, what do you need?" From what I could hear of the voice, it was Linda.

The woman told her about the state police officer that was trying to reach her, but Linda seemed a little confused by the ploy. I could hear expressway noises in the background, but there was no way to pinpoint where she was.

Linda told her daughter that she'd call the cop, and then they started arguing. Apparently Linda hadn't told Natasha where she was staying and wasn't about to.

When they were done, Mac called the chantry. "Dakota, this is Cormac."

"What can I help you with?"

"The call that just came in to Natasha's phone," he said. "Where was it from?"

"Burton," she replied. "Would you like the number?"

"Can you run a quick scan and match it up with any dive motels?" he asked.

"Well, give me a minute." I could hear keystrokes on the other end of the line as I followed Mac out into the hallway. He looked pointedly at Jax who was with Lydia in a store across the way and gestured subtly toward the entrance we'd come in at. We headed that way ourselves.

By the time we'd reached the center court of the mall, Dakota had Mac's information. The call had come from a motel near the intersection of Atherton Road and Saginaw Street.

"We are on our way over there," he told her. "If there is someone you could send for possible damage control, it would be appreciated."

"How many do you need?"

"That depends on how willingly she comes," he replied. When she asked what he was expecting, he said, "I'm hoping for peacefully, but I'm expecting the worst. Her master is not the most... cooperative."

"I can send three ghouls and come myself if you'd like," she offered.

"Any help would be appreciated," he assured her.

Within minutes we were back on the bike and headed for Burton.

CAPTURE

AFTER ALL THE MILES BETWEEN US
AND FOR ALL THE TIME THAT'S PASSED
YOU WOULD THINK I HAVEN'T GOTTEN VERY FAR
THE SONG REMEMBERS WHEN - TRISHA YEARWOOD

When we got to the motel, Dakota and the three ghouls she'd promised Mac were waiting. Their car stuck out like a sore thumb among the beaters in the lot. One of the cars parked near the end of the building had a temporary license paper in the back window.

Mac in his suit assumed an official look and headed for the office with Jax in tow. While they were gone I looked over the two-story building thinking it was the perfect place to disappear. I'd lived in enough hotels just like it to know.

There was a vacancy sign in the office window, but half the letters had burned out. The windows were dirty and many of the doors needed painting. The balcony along the upper floor didn't look real sturdy, but the stairs at least looked safe. Lights shone from several of the rooms, two on the ground floor and two on the second.

Mac and Jax came out a few minutes later, looking at the building as they walked toward us. Mac gave the car with the temporary plate a long look before turning to Dakota.

"She's in room 212," he told us.

Of course we all looked at the building. Her room was on the second floor four doors from the far end of it.

"What's the plan?" Dakota asked.

"Eliza, Dakota, with me," he said firmly. "Jax, Lydia, go around to the back and watch the fire escape." We'd seen it when we'd pulled up. He pointed at two of the other ghouls. "Go to the side of the building, back up which ever way she goes." He looked at the last puppy and pointed at the car with the paper license in the window. "Stay down here, make sure this car doesn't go anywhere."

He headed for the motel, undoing the hooks that held his guns in place in preparation for the trouble he seemed to be expecting. I hoped he wasn't planning on going in with guns blaring, that he'd at least try to take Linda peacefully. I knew I had to find out before we got to her door, so I touched his arm as we went up the stairs.

"What's the plan?" I asked softly when I had his attention.

"I knock, you identify, we take her," he told me.

"And how exactly do we take her?"

He stopped and looked down at me pointedly. "Any means necessary."

Yeah, I knew that. "And we first try...?"

"To Dominate her," he replied.

That was what I was hoping for, but there was more to think about. "Okay, and you don't think she's going to freak out when she sees me?"

"That's why you're not knocking."

"I just wanted to clarify things," I told him.

After a moment he started walking again. He made sure I was standing on the side of the door away from the window and we stood there listening for a minute. When Mac asked me if I heard anything I told him that I could hear a television on inside but nothing else.

He knocked on the door, then put his finger over the peephole to stop her from looking out. The sound of the television got softer and I heard someone come toward the door.

"Who is it?" a woman's voice asked. I didn't have to see her face to know it was Linda.

"Miss Lydia Gretzke?" Mac asked.

"Who is it?" she repeated.

In the window I could see the curtain move a little as she looked out. It only took that glimpse of her face for me to recognize her. She didn't look very much different from the last time I'd seen her.

"Deputy James," he replied. "There's been an accident, I need you to come down and identify the body."

Damn that was cruel. I didn't agree with his methods, but they seemed to work well enough. The television went off and a minute later I heard the chain being taken from the door.

The moment the door started to open, Mac pushed it hard, but Linda's foot must have been right behind it because the door didn't go very far. He moved to the right a little and pushed again. Linda went stumbling backward and fell to the grounds still clutching her purse.

Mac followed her and stood with both of his guns trained on her head. I trailed after him and looked down at the woman I'd once thought was my mother.

"Hi Linda," I said softly. "Long time no see."

"Stand up, slowly," Mac demanded.

Linda just sat there staring at me as if she was seeing a ghost. I guess in a way she was. When Mac put one of his guns away and grabbed her arm to pull her to her feet, she started fighting him.

"Don't," he warned her, placing the barrel of his gun against her forehead.

I wanted to say something, do something to stop him, but I knew I couldn't, not with Dakota here watching. Anyway, Linda stopped struggling and looked at him for the first time.

"Who are you?" she whispered.

"Turn around," he ordered as he spun her and shoved her against the wall. He held her there with a hand on her back as he put his other gun away.

"What's this all about?" she asked, sounding frightened.

He ignored her and started searching her for weapons. I moved closer just in case she decided to fight, but it wasn't necessary. As soon as Mac found a gun at the small of her back, he pulled a needle out of his pocket and shot her full of tranquilizers.

Once he'd guided her unconscious body to the floor, he turned to Dakota. "Go let the others know the situation is under control."

"No problem," she said on her way out the door.

Mac spent a couple of minutes stripping Linda of weapons and putting her in hand cuffs and shackles. I tried not to watch, tried not to feel bad at what was happening to her, but it was hard, I didn't like seeing her like that. I started going through the room to take my mind off it. It didn't really help.

In the closet I found several boxes of her things. There wasn't as much as I'd have figured considering how cleaned out the apartment in Pittsburgh had been, but this looked like the important stuff, pictures and other keepsakes along with some of Linda's personal things.

To my surprise, there was a photograph album filled with pictures of me as a kid in one of the boxes. They were old and faded, and the album had a worn look to it as if it had been handled a lot. I wondered if Kate or Linda had been doing the handling.

I opened one of the other photograph albums to find a wedding picture of Natasha and her ex-husband. They both looked very happy, as if they didn't have a care in the world. The next few pages were full of wedding pictures, and I wasn't really surprised to see that Kate had showed up for the reception. After the sun went down, of course.

It all looked too normal. I'd had the same 'mother' growing up, the same family friend. Why hadn't Natasha's life turned out like mine? She got the loving mother, the kind family friend, the husband and the freaking dog. I knew it wasn't her fault, but still a part of me hated her for having the normal life I never got to have.

I closed the book with a snap that drew Dakota's attention as she came back into the room with Jax. I turned away and put it back into the box I'd found it in, then added some other things to the box as well.

Mac gave Jax the keys to Linda's car and told him to see if there was anything useful in it. We found two sets of identification in the room, one for Lydia Gretzke, and another for Lynn Green. Turns out that was the name she'd used to buy the car.

After we were done packing up the room and loading everything into Linda's car, Jax and one of the other ghouls carried Linda downstairs. They put her in the trunk of Dakota's car and we all went back to the chantry leaving no trace that Linda had ever been in the hotel. We even took her car.

QUESTIONING

CAUSE GROWIN' UP I WAS NEVER THE LOGICAL ONE

PACKED MY SHIT AND LEFT HOME LIKE THE PRODIGAL SON

PRODIGAL SON - KID ROCK

Linda was coming around a little when we got to the chantry, and Mac made sure she was put in a basement cell before she could recover her senses.

"We'll wait," he murmured, watching her through the glass in the door.

"For what?" I asked him.

"For her to wake up." He took her purse from Dakota and started going through it while I leaned against the wall next to the door and watched him.

He didn't find a whole lot in her purse, some money, a gun, a small address book and identification with Lynn Greene's name on it. The address book had that number from Bar Harbor in it and it reminded me that I had to find out who those people were and what their involvement with Kate was.

By the time Mac was done searching the purse, I could hear vomiting coming from inside the cell. He glanced up once or twice, but didn't seem very concerned about her misery. Dakota didn't say anything either, just waited with us for Linda to come around.

Some time later Mac flipped a switch that made the one way class clear. I couldn't see Linda, but Mac's face was hard.

"Who is Natasha?" he demanded without prelude.

"Who are you?" I heard her ask. She sounded confused.

"Who is Natasha?"

"Who are you?" Her voice a little clearer now, like she was beginning to understand the trouble she was in.

"Answer my question and I'll answer yours," Mac told her.

"Is my daughter all right?" she asked sharply. "Is she alive?"

"Yes, but she's not your daughter," he replied. "Ghouls can't have children." Vampire blood doesn't allow the child to come to term.

"She is my daughter," Linda said coldly, sounding nothing if not offended.

"How is that possible?"

"She's mine."

That line of questioning was getting him nowhere so he tried something different. "When was the last time you saw Kate?"

"Who are you?" she demanded.

"Cormac," he said simply.

The name didn't seem to mean anything to her. "What do you want?"

"Information."

"And why should I give it to you?"

"Because I'll kill you if you don't." He was dead serious and made sure she knew it. "When was the last time you saw Kate?"

"Yesterday," she drawled.

"Bullshit." He looked irritated, but not like he hadn't expected her attitude. "Is Natasha your daughter like Eliza was?"

"Did I really see her?" she demanded, a pleading note to her voice. "Was she really there?"

"Answer my question first," he told her.

"Eliza was my daughter," she said.

"Eliza was Kate's daughter, she left her in your charge," he corrected her sharply. When Linda didn't reply, he asked, "Do you treat Natasha like you treated Eliza?"

"I don't see where that's any of your business," she replied in coolly.

"Is that why she only brought Thomas to see you once?"

"Who are you and how do you know this stuff?" she demanded angrily.

"I'm someone that Kate had killed," he told her coldly.

She didn't react to that at all. "Was it really Eliza?"

He glanced my way and I knew he was leaving it up to me to decide if I wanted her to know I was there. I didn't think it was a big deal either way so I moved toward the window and Mac took a step back to give me room. I looked at her, really looked at her for the first time.

Her hair was damp and her clothes were a mess. She looked like she was going to be sick again any minute and I could smell vomit through the door. She was pathetic, staring at me like I was the prodigal child returned from the dead. She struggled to her feet and hobbled toward the door, crying.

Was I supposed to be impressed at her caring for me? Were her tears supposed to move something inside of me and make me want to help her out of the mess she found herself in? I didn't know what she wanted to accomplish, but whatever she was shooting for it wasn't working.

I'd seen and heard enough. This woman was everything I never wanted to be, weak, pitiful, addicted. I wanted to tell myself I'd never be like her, but I just didn't know if that were true.

I mean really, I was weak, wasn't I? I'd compromised everything I'd ever believed in to save Corrine long before Mac came back from the dead. And now I was Mac's ghoul, drinking his blood to bond myself to him. It wasn't so much of a stretch to think I could be like her some day.

Feeling nothing but disgust, I turned and walked back to where I'd been standing. I listened to them argue for a while, but Mac really didn't get anything out of her. She did surprise me by asking him if he was holding me against my will.

Mac almost smiled. "She is with me of her own free will."

Soon after that, he hit the button that turned the glass back into a one way mirror and told Dakota that we would be leaving just after sundown the next night. We went upstairs and let Jax know so he could make the flight arrangements, then Mac told me that he wanted us to try and talk to Natasha. He wanted to know how much contact she'd had with Kate over the years and to see how much information he could get about who her mother really was.

I thought about the photo albums we'd found in Linda's motel room. "What if she's seen all those pictures Linda had of me and wants to know who the hell I am?"

"Hmm, what if?" he asked softly, as if it didn't matter.

For real now, I guess it didn't. Those pictures were at least thirty years old. If she did recognize me I could always say I was my own daughter.

SISTER

HE IS EVERYTHING INSIDE OF YOU
THAT YOU WISH THAT YOU COULD BE
EVERYTHING YOU WANT - VERTICAL HORIZONS

When we got to Natasha's house, we could see lights on inside and hear the boy playing. Mac knocked on the door and Natasha peeked out through the curtains at us. She unlocked the door and opened it just enough to talk to us.

"Can I help you?" she asked politely.

"Yes," Mac replied pleasantly. "Can we speak with you for a moment?"

She looked between the two of us, I'm sure wondering what the hell she could help us with. "About what?"

"Lydia, your mother."

She didn't seem too surprised. "Are you a police officer? Is this about that car?"

Mac shook his head. "There is no car, ma'am," he admitted. "We've been trying to find her and we need some information. If you could help us we would appreciate it."

After a moment's thought, she opened the door and let us in. She took us through the living room where she turned off the television and into the kitchen.

"Can I get you something to drink?" she asked as she offered us seats.

"No thank you," Mac replied. "We don't want to take up any more of your time than we have to."

She nodded and sat down, obviously nervous.

"Did your mother have any alias' that you know of?" he asked, choosing to dive right in as usual.

She frowned. "I'm sorry, what is all this about?"

I watched her as they talked, looking for anything that would remind me of Linda or Kate. He asked her if she knew Kate, and started running down the list of alias' we had for her. Natasha interrupted him when she recognized Karen McBride.

"I know Karen, what about her?"

He leaned forward in his chair. "What was her relation with your mother, do you know?"

"They were friends," she said simply.

"How well did you know her?"

"She was my mom's friend."

"How close a friend?"

"Really close, I guess." She shrugged. "I don't know, they spent a lot of time together when Karen was in town. Why?"

"Karen is an... evil person," he told her gently.

"What do you mean?" she asked, sounding a little amused. "Is she like some mass murderer or something?"

"She had a few people killed," he replied seriously.

That seemed to throw her off a little. "I'm sorry, but she doesn't seem the type."

Kate didn't look like the type for a lot of things she'd done, but she was. For instance, she didn't look like a blood-sucking fiend.

"Looks can be quite deceiving," Mac reminded Natasha.

"Who did she have killed?" she demanded.

"She is wanted for questioning in disappearance and murder cases dotting the East Coast," he told her.

"Wow." She was thrown for a moment, but she recovered quickly. "That's really odd because she just doesn't seem the type. She was always really nice. What does this have to do with my mother?"

Mac hesitated for a moment, then said, "May I ask you a personal question?"

"I suppose," she replied hesitantly.

"Are you adopted?"

"No."

"Do you have a copy of your birth certificate?" he asked.

"No, there was a fire in the courthouse," she explained.

"Mmm-hmm."

His response must have offended her. "It's a matter of public record that the courthouse burned. All public records were lost."

"Including your school transcripts from before you moved to Pittsburgh?" he demanded.

"I don't know anything about that," she told him, frowning.

"The woman you know as your mother has a medical condition that prevents her from having children," he said bluntly.

"What are you talking about?" she asked, irritated. "She is my mother. What kind of proof do you have of all this? I don't know you from some stranger walking down the street. I don't even know your name."

"My name is Angus Brennan," he lied.

"And what do you have to do with Karen?" she demanded. "Or my mother?"

"As I said, I'm looking for information that will help us prove that Karen committed these crimes," he told her calmly.

"And what sort of proof do you have that my mother has this medical problem that she can't have children?" She didn't believe him for a minute. "Obviously she can because she had me."

"There is no proof of that," Mac stated.

"There's no proof against that," she insisted.

"No proof supporting it either," he added.

She shook her head. "Well, you will forgive me for taking my mother's word over a complete stranger."

"Of course."

"Were you the one who called earlier about the car?" she asked suddenly.

"Yes."

She leaned forward. "Where is my mother?"

"We were unable to find her," he told her.

She studied his face for a long moment. "You're lying. What have you done with my mother?"

"I haven't done anything with her," he replied calmly. And he hadn't, at least not yet.

"Where is she?"

"She's safe," he assured her.

She looked skeptical. "Why should I believe you?"

He chose not to answer that question. "Your mother was in all of the cities the murders were committed in with Karen."

"Are you thinking she was a part of it?"

"At the least," he murmured.

She sat up straighter and I saw anger in her eyes. "My mother would never do anything like that. She would never hurt anyone."

I looked down at the flowered tablecloth and remembered the years I'd lived in terror of Linda's fists.

"Show her the scar on your leg," Mac told me softly.

My eyes shot to his face in surprise. What did he expect me to do, bare all in this woman's kitchen? From the look on his face, he did.

"What are you talking about?" Natasha demanded.

Reluctantly I got to my feet and unfastened my pants. With an irritated look at Mac, I dropped my pants and made sure Natasha got a good look at the scar our 'mother' had given me when I was twelve.

"See the scar on her leg?" he asked.

"So she has a scar," Natasha answered. "What does that have to do with my mother?"

"The scar is from where your mother stuck a steak knife in her when my associate was a young girl," he said ruthlessly.

I could see that she didn't want to believe him, but really what choice did she have? He was telling the truth.

"You're lying," she insisted. "My mother would never hurt anyone."

"No I'm not."

She must have realized he was being honest because she looked at me. "Why would my mother hurt you?"

I looked at Mac, not sure what to tell this woman about Linda and Kate.

"Your mother was angry with her," he answered for me.

"That's putting in mildly," I said under my breath as I pulled my pants back up. Linda had been so pissed she was nearly homicidal.

"Has she ever done anything like this to you or Thomas?" he asked.

"No, never." She seemed upset, like she was trying to reconcile the woman she'd grown up with and the cruel person that had stabbed me.

"How well do you know your father?"

"I don't," she told him. "He died when I was a baby."

He glanced at me. "That sounds familiar. Do you have any pictures of him?"

"No."

"Did you ever see any pictures of him?"

"No, my mother never had any."

"Why didn't your marriage work out?" he asked suddenly.

She frowned at him. "I don't see where that's any business of yours," she replied in a frosty voice.

"If your mother was involved, than it is," he replied calmly.

"My mother was living in Pittsburgh." She'd gotten offended by his question and looked like she was ready to ask us to leave.

"I was just asking, calm down," he soothed.

She glanced angrily at me. "Look, I don't know what you did to piss her off or if that even happened, but my mother would never murder anyone," she said firmly.

"I wasn't saying your mother did murder anyone," Mac assured her, "rather that she was an accessory, a full accomplice."

"I don't know why she would do that," she replied defensively.

I noticed Natasha didn't say that her mother wouldn't do it, just that she didn't know why her mother would.

"Wouldn't you kill for your best friend?" he asked softly.

"I honestly doubt it," she replied firmly. "I don't think I would kill for anyone, except my son. Do you normally go around killing for your good friends?" She looked from Mac to me. "Would you kill for her?"

"That is my job," he told her.

When she asked exactly what his job was, he fed her some bullshit story about the X-files and the fact that we didn't exist. It sounded so much like a science fiction movie I wanted to laugh, but she seemed to buy it. She even started looking scared.

"*Calm* down ma'am," he said purposefully. "We mean you no harm." When she settled down, he asked if Linda had ever shown any violent tendencies.

"No," she replied quickly. "That's why I find it really hard to believe that she would come after anyone with a knife."

"Did Karen?"

"She had a temper." From the look on her face there was a story behind that statement, but I didn't even want to ask. "Lots of people have tempers without killing anyone," she added defensively. "I've been known to have a temper myself and I've never killed anyone."

"I've never killed anyone because of my temper," Mac murmured with a smile. "Do you happen to remember the name of the doctor who supposedly delivered you?"

"Dr May," she replied. "Where is my mother?"

"She's safe at the moment," he assured her.

"Safe like in chains somewhere?" she demanded.

"She is in protected confinement."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"It means that Karen can't get to her," he told her.

That seemed to surprise her. "Do you think she would hurt her if she did?"

"She would do something to her," he replied vaguely.

"Are you going to keep her safe?" she challenged him. "Or is this the 'put you in prison for the next twenty years to keep you safe'."

"Not prison," he assured her. "She is going to be held for questioning."

When she asked where, he wouldn't tell her. He just mumbled something about it being classified.

"Well, obviously there is nothing more I can tell you," she said firmly. "I don't have any information for you."

"I thank you for your time," he said politely. He started to stand, but then paused. "Are you sure there isn't anything else you need to tell us?"

"Like what?"

"Do you recognize any of these other names?" He listed off a few more, including Linda Gentry and Kate Hepburn.

"My mother said she changed her name in the late sixties," she told him. "It was once Linda Gentry. Kate Hepburn was once Karen's name."

"What about Tom Pennick?"

"That was a boyfriend of Karen's," she admitted.

"Oh, really," Mac murmured.

"Yes, when I was real young."

She didn't seem to realize she'd just dropped a bombshell in our laps. The Tom Pennick she knew had to be the one Mac thought was my father, and if he was still alive when Natasha was younger, he couldn't possibly have died before I was born. Unless he was a vamp, of course, that would change everything.

"You don't recall seeing him any other time?" he asked intently. "Recently perhaps?"

"No, she said that he dumped her when I was seven or eight," she told him softly. "I never saw him again. She was real torn up about it too. Do you think she killed him? Is that one of your murder victims?"

"Well, we have him dying twice," Mac admitted.

"That's strange," she murmured. "People don't usually die more than once."

"People are usually born, but there is no record of you," he said pointedly.

"I told you what happened with that," she shot back irritably.

"When did this fire happen?"

"I don't know."

"Do you remember it happening or do you remember your mother telling you it happened?"

"I remember her telling me that was why I don't have a copy of my birth certificate."

"Do you remember it or did she tell you?" he repeated.

She thought for a moment. "I don't remember it."

"Uh-huh," Mac murmured dryly.

"Why would she lie?"

I could think of any number of reasons, the first of which was that she was hiding something. The question was, what was she hiding?

"Why did you move from Atlantic City to Pittsburgh?" Mac asked.

"My mother likes Pittsburgh," she said easily enough. "She'd lived there once before and she wanted to move back."

When he asked why she picked the Flint campus of the University of Michigan, she told him it had an excellent arts history program. It wasn't until he pressed a little that she admitted Linda had been a little overprotective.

"She didn't want me to have a life," Natasha reluctantly admitted, "so I figured that the further I got away from her the better I would be. Flint has a good arts history program so I came here."

"Why wouldn't your mother tell you where she was staying?" he asked.

"You'd have to ask her that," she said tightly. I could tell the subject was still pissing her off.

"I'm asking you though," he replied smoothly. "Why wasn't she staying here?"

"She said someone was after her," she shot back angrily. "I guess she was right. She said she didn't want to endanger us. Are we in danger?"

He smiled innocently. "No ma'am."

"Where did you find her?" she demanded.

Mac told her, but Natasha didn't recognize the name of the hotel. When he said where it was, she looked down at the table sadly.

"Sounds like she was trying to get lost," she whispered.

"If you had her past, you would too," Mac replied.

Her head shot up. "Why, what was her past?"

"You'd have to ask her."

"I'm not likely to be able to find her, am I?" she demanded. "I'm asking you. I've answered a lot of your questions, don't you think you should do the same for me?"

"I don't have the answers to that," he said quietly.

She didn't believe him. "You don't know anything about her past?"

"Very little," he said honestly. "I know she's connected with Karen."

"That's all you know?"

He smiled a little. "You'd be surprised how many public buildings have burned, how many files have been lost, especially where your mother and Karen are concerned."

She sat back and looked at him thoughtfully. "You make it sound like they're major criminals."

"Then your reason is not lost."

She studied his face for a long moment, then looked down at the table again. "She didn't tell me anything about her past."

"She moved around a lot," he offered.

"I knew that."

"Someone died each time they moved," he added, his voice hard.

She shook her head. "I still find it really hard to believe that Karen would be like that."

"If you only knew that half of it ma'am," he drawled.

"And you're not likely to tell me, are you?" she grumbled. "Or about my mother."

"I told you, I don't know that much about her," he said softly. "And what select facts I do know don't paint a very good picture of her."

Her chin went up. "Then I don't want to know."

We were wasting time here and Mac knew it. Natasha probably didn't know anything more than what she'd already told us, and if she did, I doubt she would have shared it with us. He rose to his feet and I did too.

"I've taken enough of your time," he told her. "Thank you for your cooperation."

"I guess you're welcome. I can't see where I've helped much." She stood up and walked us to the door.

Mac thanked her once more before we left, and I could feel her eyes on us while we walked to the bike. We'd certainly given her enough to think about when it came to her mother. Maybe it was better that she never learned the truth about Linda. Sometimes it's better to leave people with their illusions. After all, Natasha still loved her mother.

INDICATIONS

SCARS ARE SOUVENIRS YOU NEVER LOSE

THE PAST IS NEVER FAR

NAME - GOO GOO DOLLS

I talked Mac into stopping for some food before we went back to the chantry. Since he didn't eat, well, food anyway, and sometimes he forgot that I had to. Normally I tried to eat just before sundown, but I couldn't go all night without eating.

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

"Someplace that serves food." I wasn't picky, just hungry.

He drove to the nearest McDonald's and we went inside.

"You want something?" I asked before I headed to the counter.

He gave me a warm look. "No, not that you can buy here."

I laughed softly and went for some food. He found a booth by the window and waited for me to join him.

"Well, we didn't have to kill Linda," I said when I got settled.

"Yet."

My eyebrows shot up as I opened a packet of ketchup. "Are we expecting to kill Linda?"

"You saw how cooperative she was," he reminded me calmly as he watched me eat.

"She was behaving like Kate," I agreed. "Did you expect anything different?"

"No," he admitted.

I nodded. "So now that you have Linda, and Kate, and now know more information and have lots of pictures..." Gee there was no way to beat around the bush about this. "When can we kill her?"

"That is something you have to ask the prince," he told me.

"No, dear, that's something that *you* have to ask the prince," I replied. "I don't talk to the prince, I'm just a peon." I wanted to say 'puppy', but it would have pissed him off.

"I'll broach the subject shortly," he promised.

Now for the big question. "Are you going to kill her or do I get to?"

"I figured we'd torture her for a while," he drawled.

As much as I liked the idea, "That didn't answer my question."

He shrugged. "It depends on if she cooperates or not."

"Okay, I don't see the difference," I told him. "If she cooperates or not, we're still going to kill her."

"I told her that if she cooperated I would kill her as quickly as possible," he admitted.

"I can kill her quickly." It really didn't take that long to destroy a vamp. A sharp knife across the throat and bye-bye blood-sucker.

"Yes, but I told her if she didn't I would let you kill her as painfully as possible," he said with a smile.

He sure knew the way to a woman's heart. "So we pray for her to not cooperate?"

"Well, no," he replied hesitantly, "but yes, but..."

"I could do it anyway," I insisted. "She's going to die, what does it matter?"

"We'll burn that bridge when we get to it, pardon the pun," he said quietly.

"Burning would be a good way to kill her," I murmured. Burning usually took longer than decapitation, and it hurt a lot more.

While I ate my food, Mac called Micky to let her know we'd 'acquired' Linda. Micky was disappointed to hear that she hadn't given us any information yet, but glad that we'd taken her with no breaches of the Masquerade.

Micky was very interested to learn about Linda's 'daughter'. They agreed that Kate had probably dominated both Linda and Natasha into believing they were mother and daughter. Micky seemed to have his doubts about the records in Atlantic City having burned, but promised to check into everything when Mac faxed what information he had to Salem.

"Is there any news on this Tom Pennick?" Mac asked.

"No, but I do have some information about the private detective that Prudence was apparently working with," Micky replied solemnly. "He's been found dead."

"Ah, lovely," Mac drawled with a soft laugh.

"You don't sound surprised."

"Not at all," Mac assured him. "How long dead?"

"I'm surprised the neighbors didn't report the smell," Micky said distastefully. "It was probably around the same time Prudence was taken into custody. Within a few days anyway, the body's a little decayed."

"Wrapping up her loose ends."

"It appears that way," Micky agreed. "We're trying to back track to find some of the other private detectives that she may have worked with in the past. Was there any information in the photos you found?"

"Not pertaining to private detectives," he replied. "There were numerous security type pictures, but no business cards or names."

"Well, if you can identify the cities those pictures were taken in and maybe the time frame, maybe we can find them," Micky suggested.

"I'll set about categorizing them."

"That would be appreciated. Maybe she's made a habit of killing her private detectives." Micky paused for a moment, then said, "You'd be interested to note that we had an incident with Prudence this evening. Around eight o'clock she completely flipped out."

"Hmm," Mac murmured. "That's the time I apprehended Linda."

"It took her quite some time to exhaust herself," Micky added.

"Has anyone checked her person for hidden vitae?" Mac asked.

"We checked her for the usual," Micky assured him. "I don't know what else we'd search her for."

"She seems to be able to do a lot of things that require blood."

"We'll check again, unless you prefer to do that when you get back."

"It's not at the top of my list of tasks." Mac told Micky we'd be flying back the next night with Linda. "I don't know how cooperative Linda will be once we land, she's a bit complacent now, but..."

"We'll have a van and several people there to give you a hand," Micky assured him.

Mac thanked him and after they'd said good night he hung up the phone.

BOUNDARIES

AND THOUGH WE'VE CHANGED OUR WAYS
STILL ALL OUR DEMONS ARE LAUGHING.
FORGIVE ME - GODSMACK

When we got back to the chantry, Falcon asked Mac if he could have a word alone with him.

Mac looked down at me. "Why don't you go back to the room?"

"Can I go downstairs to check on Linda?" I asked. I was a little worried about her reaction to the sedative earlier.

"Don't say anything to her," he cautioned, "and remember anything she says to you."

"I wasn't planning on saying anything to her," I told him. "I just wanted to check on her, make sure she was all right."

Mac seemed to understand. "I'll join you when I'm done."

I nodded to Falcon and went downstairs to find Jax and Lydia lounging in the hall near Linda's cell. I'd expected to find them there, earlier they'd been told to keep an eye on her.

Linda looked a little restless, and very much afraid, but that was pretty much what I'd expected. She didn't seem any worse for wear from the drugs Mac had given her which made me feel a little better.

I leaned against the wall by the door and talked quietly with the other ghouls for a few minutes before Lydia asked me what Mac was doing.

Maybe it was just my imagination, but I didn't like tone of her voice. "He's talking to Falcon, he'll be down soon."

She looked at me speculatively. "Jax tells me you had an interesting trip to Europe."

That comment earned her a hard look from Jax. "Lydia, don't start," he warned her.

I didn't understand why he was trying to intervene. "It was interesting," I agreed, trying to read her eyes.

"What's it like?" she asked.

"What's what like?"

"His kiss," she drawled with a sensual smile. Vamps and their ghouls usually call the feeding a 'kiss'. "He's a very attractive vampire, I'll bet his kiss is really something."

All right, now I totally didn't like her tone. It was as if she was deliberately trying to provoke me. "Don't you have your own vampire?" I asked her coldly. She was Ford's ghoul, the most important vamp in the chantry, you'd think that would be enough for her.

"Yes, but he's nothing like your Mac," she purred, smiling smugly to herself. "I'm sure I'll find out soon enough."

I turned slowly to look at her. "I don't share, Lydia," I told her plainly. I wanted nothing more than to hit her, but Mac had told me to play nice. It was damned hard, but I was managing. "You'll have to find someone else to bite you."

Jax started to say something, but Lydia interrupted him.

"A Kindred has to feed," she reminded me, looking at me like I was stupid. "You can't possibly think you're the only one he drinks of. All of us at the chantry are available to any member of the clan."

Just because she made sense didn't mean I liked what she was saying. The thought of Mac feeding from anyone but me made me burn with jealousy but she was right, he had to feed to survive. I'd been around Kindred long enough to know that one person just wasn't enough to keep a vamp provided with the blood they needed. Even I couldn't replace my blood supply that fast.

"How does he like it?" she asked when I didn't answer. "I can't wait to find out. From the wrist? Or maybe from the neck during sex?"

"Lydia," Jax barked, but it was too late, my temper had already snapped.

Her comment might not have pissed me off so badly if it didn't make me start thinking about Mac and Nina, about the fact that he'd fed from the other Kindred. Oh, I know, he'd said they were emergencies. Still, knowing how I felt when Mac sunk his teeth into my flesh filled me with a jealousy rage.

I grabbed Lydia by the throat and threw her up against the wall. Her toes were barely on the ground and I had to remind myself that I wasn't supposed to hurt her. From the corner of my eye I saw Jax reach for my shoulder, but a hot glance his way warned him not to touch me. "Back off," I growled at him.

"Eliza," he said soothingly, moving his hand away slowly. "She didn't mean anything by it, just let her go."

Before I could say anything I felt a vampire coming closer to us fast. I hoped it was Mac, I wasn't really in a good position if it were anyone else. I kept my eye on Lydia knowing there was nothing I could do about the approaching vamp. If I let her go now she'd come after me and then I'd really have to hurt her.

"What's going on?" Mac demanded, his voice telling me he was in full Cormac mode.

Jax started to say something, but I cut him off.

"Nothing," I told him calmly, my hand still on Lydia's neck. I did let her down a little, just enough so that she could support her own weight.

"Bullshit," he shot back. "Let her go."

Very slowly I removed my hand from her throat. She took a deep breath but otherwise didn't move.

"What's going on?" Mac asked harshly.

I didn't answer him, I was too busy waiting to see what Lydia was going to do. I took a slow step back, ready if she decided to come at me.

"What happened?" he demanded.

"Just—"

Mac's curt voice cut across my explanation. "Eliza, I'm not asking you," he barked.

I knew I'd had it coming so I tried not to get pissed at his tone. It occurred to me that attacking Lydia probably wasn't the brightest thing I'd done, it didn't matter that she'd been provoking me.

"It was just a misunderstanding," Jax said soothingly.

"What happened?" Mac repeated.

"They got into an argument."

"About?"

Jax hesitated, and I knew he didn't want to say something that would get either Lydia or me into any more trouble. "Masters," he said after a moment.

"Anything else?" my lover demanded.

"No," he replied. Technically, he was telling the truth.

"What happened?" Mac asked Lydia.

"That's basically what happened," she replied hoarsely, staring at me and rubbing her throat. I don't think she wanted to admit she'd brought the whole thing on herself.

"What was said?" he ordered. "Yes, I want verbatim."

"We were just discussing your feeding practices," she said reluctantly, looking at the floor.

I relaxed a little and took another step back. Mac had the situation under control and I doubted she'd be stupid enough to try anything under his watchful gaze.

"What business of yours is our feeding practices?" he demanded coldly.

She glanced up at me then looked at him ruefully. "Apparently *your* feeding practices are none of my business."

"I'm not your master," he reminded her rather forcefully. "You are not my ghoul. They are none of your business."

"Yes sir," she said with a respectful nod.

I heard Mac put his guns away then he came to stand between Lydia and me. He stared down at me for a long moment and I looked back as calmly as I could. I knew I shouldn't have attacked Lydia, but damn it, I wasn't going to apologize for it.

"Let's go," he said firmly.

"Yes sir," I replied respectfully, but I think the effect was ruined by the smile I was trying to hide. Thankfully neither of the other ghouls could see it since Mac was standing in the way.

I turned and walked toward the stairs followed closely by Mac. When we reached the corner, he stopped and turned back to the others.

"In the future if you have any problem with me, come to me," he ordered.

"Yes sir," I heard Lydia reply softly.

He hesitated a moment, then added, "If you still want to spar, all you have to do is ask her."

"Yes sir," she repeated.

He turned and gestured me toward the stairs. We walked silently to our room, Mac on my heels every step of the way. I knew he was going to grill me about the incident, and of course I was right.

"What was said?" he demanded as soon as the door was closed.

I walked over to the table and started fidgeting with the box of photos. "We were just discussing your feeding practices." That seemed like a nice way to put it.

"What about my feeding practices?" he asked. To my relief he was slipping out of 'Cormac mode'.

Still, I didn't really want to tell him everything. Lydia had been deliberately pushing my buttons and it made me wonder if Ford had told her to try and antagonize me. Finally I said, "She just, um, was more or less trying to find out what you liked when you fed."

Mac smiled a little, almost grinning. "And what did you tell her?"

I sighed. "I believe that was the point where she ended up against the wall." When he chuckled, I added, "I would have told her a few things but you showed up."

"Good thing I did," he drawled.

"I wasn't going to hurt her." But I'd wanted to. I'd wanted to hurt her so badly it had taken a lot for me to limit myself to throwing her up against the wall.

"You already did," he reminded me.

"She'll live," I told him with a shrug.

"Like master like servant," he murmured.

I looked at him in surprise. "And what is that supposed to mean?"

"I was referring to Lydia's master," he clarified.

Ford; he was talking about Ford. "Okay, pushing and always having the nose where it doesn't belong?" I walked over to the bed and flung myself down on my stomach irritably. I pulled a pillow up under my chest and looked up at my vampire lover.

"I guess you should probably get used to it," he told me. "You are a new ghoulish and all. Some of the older ones may not accept you readily."

"I don't need any puppy to accept me," I replied coldly, looking angrily away.

"I didn't say you needed them to, dear," he soothed, still chuckling. He sat down next to me on the bed and ran his hand lightly through my hair.

It didn't work, I wasn't soothed. "It's not that funny."

"Yes it was," he replied.

"No, it wasn't," I said firmly.

"The look on Lydia's face was," he told me, smiling. "I don't think she ever expected to be introduced to the wall like that."

I had to smile back. "Oh, but they made such a nice pair."

"It's a good thing we're not living at the chantry," he added.

"Yes it is," I agreed. I didn't think I could take daily contact with Lydia if she kept trying to antagonize me.

Mac brushed my hair over my shoulder. "What am I going to tell her boss?"

I hadn't thought about that, Ford was likely to be pissed that I'd manhandled his puppy. "I didn't hurt her," I protested.

"Yes you did."

"Not that bad," I told him. "It could've been worse." I could have killed her.

He smiled, but ignored my comment. "What do you feel like doing for the rest of the evening? We completed our mission and accosted a ghoulish." He chuckled again. "Or two."

"It's not that funny," I said, fighting laughter myself.

"Yes it is," he drawled. "At least Jax was smart enough to stay the hell out the way."

"He almost tried to get in the way," I murmured, remembering how he'd come close to putting his hand on my shoulder.

Mac got real serious real fast. "Oh?"

"He was smart enough to not," I assured him. "And that just took a look. You know, Lydia just didn't get the look."

I was happy to see him relax again. I rolled onto my side and put my hand on his leg. "What did you have planned for the rest of the evening? And please don't say more meditation."

"Well, you need a little bit of stress relief," he told me. "You can either meditate, or we can go party."

"Define party." I had an idea of what I wanted to do, and some might call it partying.

"I've never been to Flint. We can go take in some of the nightlife."

That wasn't exactly what I had in mind. I needed something physical to get rid of the adrenaline in my veins. "Or?"

"Or we can stay here and meditate," he replied.

"We can spar," I suggested. Jax had told me there was a gym of sorts in the basement and a good fight always helped to calm me down.

"I'm not fighting you," he told me firmly.

"You could learn." I wasn't with him twenty-four seven. He needed to know how to protect himself when I couldn't be there to watch his back.

"We could work on your Latin," he said firmly.

Damn, anything but that. I still didn't understand his insistence that I learn it, for real now, when was I ever going to use Latin? "Isn't there a bar we can go to?"

He laughed and we went to ask one of the house ghouls about local bars. Once he assured the ghoul he wasn't looking for somewhere to feed, Mac asked about somewhere with hard rock music.

We ended up at a bar called The Crucible, a Kindred hangout that varied their music styles each night of the week. Tonight it just happened to have a hard rock band, and it sounded wonderful to me as we walked in.

"Meet with your approval?" Mac asked over the driving music.

"Works for me." I grinned. "Not something I thought you'd pick."

The music was just the way I like it, hard and fast and driving. We found a table near the dance floor and Mac ordered drinks while I listened to the band. I knew without asking that Mac wouldn't dance with me, not to this anyway. Since I'd never been one for much modesty, I soon found my way onto the dance floor. I wasn't alone by any means, the place was crowded with vamps and blood doll wannabes.

I closed my eyes and let the music drive through me while I danced. I relied on my spider-sense to keep me clear of the vamps on the dance floor, and avoided getting too close to anyone. I could feel Mac's eyes on me and it made me feel safe, like I could do whatever I needed to relieve my stress and he would watch over me.

The few times the tempo slowed, Mac joined me on the floor. It was nice, fabulous, just what I needed to relax. I knew we'd have to worry about Ford when we got back to Salem, but for now it was just as easy to forget anything and everything except Mac and the music.

"You had your fun," he said as we walked to the bike when the bar closed. "Now we do a little work."

I was afraid I already knew, but I had to ask. "And what are we working on?"

"Latin," he replied firmly, smiling.

We started in on it as soon as we got back to the chantry. I wasn't very interested at first, but then Mac came up with a novel way to hold my attention. I'd never done any strip studying before, but it sure made me want to learn Latin.

Afterward, Mac showed me exactly how he liked to feed.

TYING THINGS IN

WHAT BREAKS YOUR HEART?

WHAT KEEPS YOU AWAKE AT NIGHT?

WHAT MAKES YOU WANT TO BREAKDOWN AND CRY?

TELL IT LIKE IT IS - TRACY CHAPMAN

Despite my stress management the night before, I didn't sleep very well that day. I laid in the bed beside Mac and worried about what kind of reaction Ford would have to my little fight with Lydia. Ford was the highest ranking Tremere in the chantry, technically even higher than the prince, his own childe. He had the ability to make life easy or hard for Mac and me, and I'd been stupid enough to assault one of his ghouls. It didn't make for an easy rest.

I gave up trying around noon and got up to find something to eat. The house was very quiet, too quiet. I made a quick sandwich and took it outside to eat in the sunshine. I could hear the expressway across the golf course, but the sound seemed very distant. I knew I couldn't spend all day brooding. I didn't think I could sleep so I figured I'd better do something productive.

I went back to our room and took out a piece of paper to write down a few things that had been bothering me about the things we'd learned in the last few days about Tom Pennick. Other than his time in New Jersey in the seventies, I'd been in the same city he was for every date the clan had found record of him.

I pulled out the picture of Tom Pennick and studied it for a long time. I was usually pretty good with faces, but I couldn't remember ever seeing him before, or even a picture of him. If this was my father, Kate had done a damn good job of keeping him from me, even when we were in the same city.

Putting my list aside, I sat the box of pictures on the table and started going through them. The first thing I did was separate the pictures into piles by the city I thought they were taken in. Some of them I could tell the city right away, but others weren't so easy. It took me a while, but I finally figured most of them out.

What had thrown me was the fact that some of the photographs had been taken before I'd moved to Baltimore. There weren't that many of them, but enough for me to know that Kate'd had a good idea of most of the places I'd been from the time I'd left Atlantic City. I added those cities to my list, along with what dates I could remember. I made a few more notes on the page, then put the list aside.

The pictures of Corrine were much easier to go through. She had aged over the last nineteen years, and of course most of the photographs had been taken in Bar Harbor. Some of them made me smile, but one in particular made me want to cry.

It had been taken on the beach in Bar Harbor, on a bright sunny afternoon. Corrine was playing in the sand as if she didn't have a care in the world, but I was obviously tense. Corrine was almost ten in that picture, and she fresh had scrapes on her knees. My shirt was dirty and one of my shoulders looked bruised, but it was hard to tell.

Looking at that photograph made me tired, bone tired. It had been taken the day I'd started working for the Tremere, the day that Corrine had almost been killed by a speeding car. I'd pushed her out of the way and been hit by it myself, but I hadn't really been hurt, not physically anyway.

Every day of my life between that one and this one had been lived for the clan. Every thing I'd done in the last ten years had been done to protect her from the monsters that ruled the night, monsters like the one that slept in the bed not ten feet away from me.

I rubbed my tired eyes and told myself I didn't need to think like that anymore. Mac wasn't a monster he was the man I loved, the man I'd loved for the last twenty years. He didn't seem to mind being a vampire for all that we used to hunt them together. And for all that he'd changed since his embrace, he was still that same man I'd fallen in love with.

Not realizing the picture was still in my hand, I walked over to the bed and looked down at him. Kate had been the reason for Mac's embrace, the reason I'd had to give Corrine up for adoption, the reason we hadn't been able to raise her together in a normal happy home. I could no more blame him for what he was than I could change what I am.

When I sat down on the bed and reached out to touch his face, I realized I was still holding the picture of Corrine and I taken on that beach so long ago. If Mac had been there, he might have found a way around Kate's manipulations, but I'd been helpless against the threat to Corrine.

Tears filled my eyes and streamed down my face. I laid down on the bed with my head on his stomach and let myself cry, really cry. Talking to her had helped, but I missed my daughter, missed the simple easy relationship we used to share.

I wanted so badly for a way to turn back the clock and change things so that Mac hadn't died on me in Baltimore. I would even settle for a few weeks so that I could find a different way to tell Corrine that Mac and I had broken my original contract with the clan. But I knew there was no going back, that like everything else this was something I just had to learn how to live with.

Eventually I cried myself to sleep on my lover who was dead to the world.

The dream began as it always did. Mac and I were making love on the rug in front of the fireplace in our apartment in Baltimore. His skin was warm and smooth, and in the dim firelight I could see the tattoos on his arm and chest. When it was over he rested his weight on me and it was good.

Some time later I got up to clean up before we went to bed. I pulled on Mac's shirt and started picking up our dinner dishes, feeling his eyes watching me. Then I heard the noise from the spare bedroom of the apartment. I knew what was coming and I wanted to scream, to warn my lover, but I was helpless to watch him come silently to his feet.

I edged toward the fireplace and grabbed the fireplace poker even though I knew it wouldn't do me any good against the vamps I could feel coming. I watched Mac stake the first one that came into the room before the Nosferatu who came at me tripped and fell to the floor. Mechanically I shoved the fireplace poker through its abdomen, but it just laid on the floor and laughed at me like I knew it would.

The blood on my hands seemed to take on a life of its own, and I knew I had to get away, I couldn't stand here and watch Mac die again. The vamp I'd stabbed rolled to its feet and grabbed my shoulders, then threw me across the room. I hit the wall hard enough to drive the breath from my lungs. I struggled to move, but I was frozen in place unable to breathe. I watched it pull the poker from its body and toss it aside.

Mac shouted out my name, but I couldn't hear him over the ringing in my ears. I could only whisper his name when I saw that Dougal had him in his grasp. I wanted to scream, but the sound just wouldn't come.

Then the one I'd impaled was on me again and I barely brought my leg up in time to kick it away from me. It flew across the room with a look of surprise on its face. Then another vamp grabbed me from behind. I felt her teeth sink into my neck and tried to fight, but she grabbed my hair and I couldn't move away from her.

I looked helplessly across the room to where Dougal stood holding Mac to his chest, his head bent over my lover's neck. Once more I tried to scream his name before the lights went out and I was gone.

I woke instantly to the touch of a hand on my shoulder and the sound of Mac's voice. It surprised me a little, but not enough to make me afraid. I opened my eyes and looked at him before reaching up to wipe the sleep out of my eyes.

"Bad dream?" he asked, his hand still resting on my shoulder.

"Not the best," I admitted slowly.

Had it just been a dream or had Siofra been messing with my mind again? There was no way to tell and I didn't really want to set him off if it had just been a dream. I didn't remember seeing her, but that didn't mean she hadn't been there, controlling my dreams as she had for so many years. Maybe I was just being paranoid.

I'd caused enough trouble between Mac and his sister already, I sure as hell didn't want to add to it by voicing my suspicions to him. I'd lived with the nightmares for twenty years, at least now when I dreamed about the raid I knew I'd wake up to find him close to me.

"Sundown already?" I asked, trying to change the subject.

"Yes." When I sat up, he did too. "We have to go say goodbye to the prince and thank him for his hospitality," he told me. "Would you like to come with me or would you like to stay and help—why don't you come with me?"

I smiled grimly. "You just don't want to leave me with Lydia."

"No, I don't."

"I didn't hurt her," I reminded him as I got up and walked toward the bathroom.

"Yes you did," he said firmly.

"No I didn't." I stopped and turned to look at him pointedly. "It could have been worse."

"Well, yes, I didn't say it couldn't have been."

"She can heal herself," I muttered under my breath.

"I just don't want to deal with Ford any more than we have to," he told me, "especially if he's mad at me."

"Is he still mad at you?" I'd thought he'd gotten over that.

"I don't think so, I hope not." He walked over to the table and picked up the page of notes I'd taken earlier.

"I went through the pictures and wrote down some things I could remember," I told him as he looked at it. "It's interesting that Tom was in some of the same cities we were when I was growing up."

I didn't wait for his answer before I went into the bathroom to wash my face and get ready for the night. When I came out he was ready and we went to visit the prince. It went quickly and well, and within half an hour we were back at the chantry.

Mac got another hypodermic needle from Dakota and as we walked downstairs, I asked him why he felt we needed to drug her again.

"I don't want to deal with her on the plane," he told me firmly. "I want her to be out for the entire ride."

I could see his point, but I didn't like the thought of making her sick again. Still, he was the boss, I was just the lackey.

Lydia didn't look any worse for my manhandling of her the night before, but she didn't seem too happy to see us. Still, she acted respectfully toward Mac, I guess that was all I could hope for.

I went into the cell first, hoping to talk Linda into being reasonable. Unfortunately, she wasn't in a reasonable mood. Mac and Lydia joined me in holding her down while Jax injected the drug into her arm. She was out like a light within seconds.

We loaded her into the trunk of the rental car and drove to the airport where we laid her on the couch in the main cabin. Once we were in the air, Mac called Micky to let him know we're on our way.

Lydia spent the flight in the cockpit with Jax, which was okay with me. I sat next to Mac on the couch and watched Linda sleep.

Corrine had left a message on Mac's voice mail and when he called her back, she was happy to hear that we'd be back in town later that night, and seemed anxious to talk to me. I wasn't sure what to make of that, but I did want to see her.

THE PRISONERS

AND NOW MY HEART IS HARDER

MY SKIN IS GETTING TOUGHER AND TOUGHER

SCENE OF A PERFECT CRIME - CONCRETE BLONDE

Once we got into Salem one of the Tremere and another ghoul were waiting for us.

"She hasn't woken up yet," Mac told the Kindred.

"We'll make sure she's secure," Tyler assured Mac.

They loaded her into a plain van and chained her to the floor. I followed Mac in the Charger to the chantry and we watched them put her into a cell. Once the door was closed, Tyler asked if we needed them anymore.

"No, but if one of you sees Micky, please let him know that we've returned," Mac asked him. "I'll be down here speaking with Linda and then Kate."

The others left us alone and Mac led me into an observation room. It wasn't very big, and had blinds covering windows on either side. Mac told me the windows could be made one way mirrors or clear glass, and the blinds were an extra precaution.

When he told me that Kate was in the other cell the room overlooked, I peeked through the blinds at her. She was sitting on a cot in a nearly empty room looking very much like she was meditating.

My fingers itched to take her head off, but I didn't say anything. Mac knew how badly I wanted to end Kate's existence, and it was just a matter of time until one of us killed her. I just had to be patient.

Linda woke up soon after we sat down, but it took about twenty minutes for her to stop vomiting and be coherent. When she finally started looking around, Mac cleared the glass so she could see us.

"Good morning," Mac called out softly.

She looked up through the hair that covered her face and glared at him. "You again."

He smiled. "You'll be seeing a lot of me."

Wiping the back of her hand across her mouth, she stood up. "Where are we now?"

"Somewhere."

She walked over to the sink and cupped water in her hand to rinse her mouth out, then she splashed water on her face. Her movements were stiff and awkward, probably from being chained for two days.

"Are you going to cooperate with me now?" Mac asked reasonably.

She tossed a look at him over her shoulder as she stretched a little. "Why should I?"

He shrugged. "It would make your stay a little easier."

"Like it's going so easy so far," she muttered darkly.

"You haven't cooperated yet."

She turned her back on him. "Bite me," I heard her say under her breath.

Mac heard her too. "Never. So tell me, who is Natasha?"

"I already told you," she said impatiently.

"Come now, Linda," he said calmly. "You know ghouls can't have children."

"Think what you like," she replied coldly.

"So who's the father?"

"None of your business," she shot back.

"Tom?"

She tried to look surprised. "Who?"

"Tom Pennick," he told her.

"I have no idea who you are talking about."

Something about the way she said that let me know she was lying. I should have figured that her bond to Kate would make her lie, but somehow I'd expected the truth.

"Come now Linda," Mac said a bit more harshly this time. "Make this harder on me, I'll make it much harder on you. I have all the time in the world, by my estimation you're running pretty low on blood by now."

That only made her smile. "In which case I won't have to put up with you much longer."

He shrugged. "Very well, if you wish to die an agonizing horrible death..." He reached out and smoked the glass, making it impossible for her to see us. He closed the curtain and turned to open the blinds and clear Kate's glass, then waited for her to notice us.

My mother was still sitting on her cot meditating. She must have felt us watching her because she opened her eyes. She looked like she'd expected to see Mac watching her, but she barely glanced at me before she went back to meditating.

"Oh, Kate," Mac called out in a sing-song voice. When she didn't respond, he said, "I heard you had a little bit of a temper tantrum last night."

She didn't move, just sat there ignoring him.

"Are you going to cooperate with us?" he asked. "Who's Tom Pennick?"

That name got more of a rise out of her than it had for Linda. "What do you know about Tom?"

"Well, we have him placed in several locations that you and Eliza and Linda and Natasha were," he told her calmly. "We have him dying twice, it's quite interesting. Would you care to fill in some of the blanks?"

"No." She closed her eyes and went back to meditating.

"Please?" he whined, just like Corrine used to when she was little. I had to laugh, but Kate ignored him.

"Did it surprise you when you caught Linda?" he asked pleasantly. "She wasn't hidden very well."

"She never did know how to hide," Kate muttered under her breath.

"I got your car."

She looked up at him defiantly. "Which one?"

"The '63 Dodge Charger," he told her, then proceeded to run down the inventory list of the car, again. "We didn't need that box of yours, we found Linda just fine."

"Like I said she doesn't know how to hide if an imbecile like you can find her," Kate bit out savagely, her eyes still closed.

"She won't be going anywhere for a long time," he murmured. "We know right where she is."

Kate just sat there like he didn't exist, but somehow I didn't think she had the peace of mind to be meditating. Something about the way she was sitting was way too tense.

"What's wrong, Kate?" he drawled. "No kind words for your daughter?"

"Not when she's with you," she bit out. "Then again she never did have any taste."

"Look who she picked as a mother," he shot back. "So tell me, who is Natasha?"

"Linda's daughter," she replied, a smile playing at the edges of her mouth.

"Bullshit."

"Prove it."

"I'm asking you," he said coldly.

"You're a bright boy," she told him grimly, "figure it out."

"Now come on Kate, work with me for once."

I had to laugh again at the mock pleading tone of his voice.

My laughter seemed to piss her off and she finally opened her eyes to look at Mac. "I have no reason to work with you," she said in a cold voice.

"Haven't I kept my word so far?" he asked reasonably. "I told you if I helped you I'd get you warm blood."

She glanced irritably around the cell. "I don't see the warm blood."

"You didn't help me," he replied simply.

"I gave you information," she shot back.

"Information the clan found out on their own," he pointed out calmly.

She smiled grimly. "It's not my fault they're smarter than you are."

Mac sighed deeply. "Maybe I'll cut off one of Linda's hands and let you have that for your warm blood."

To my surprise Kate broke immediately into a frenzy. She attacked the glass wall between her and Mac like it was a living thing. I had a stake in my hand before I realized what I was reaching for, but amazingly enough the glass held. Still, from the way she was hitting the glass it looked like only a matter of time before she broke through it.

"Is she like this every time you talk to her?" I asked, tucking the stake up my sleeve for quick access in case she broke through.

"Mm-hmm." He watched her frenzy, obviously amused.

"And you didn't invite me to watch?" It was quite interesting, and I had to admit I liked seeing her out of control.

"I'm still trying to figure out where she's getting the blood from to do this," he said thoughtfully.

We watched her in silence for a few minutes before he finally asked her if she was done. At that she calmed down and stalked away from the glass.

"Now that that's out of the way," Mac said dryly, "are you going to tell us who Natasha is?"

She shot him a hateful look over her shoulder. "Take a long walk on a beach at sunrise," she growled.

"Come now Kate, I expected better from you," he told her firmly.

"Feed me," she hissed darkly. "I'll show you better."

"We'll see," he murmured.

She stalked toward the glass. "Why don't you come in here with me, stop hiding behind the glass?" she demanded.

"Some day," he drawled in a low voice. "Your last day."

She smiled grimly. "You keep saying that, but then you keep not doing anything about it."

"I haven't spoken with the prince since I returned," he replied. "I'll see what I can do to oblige you."

"Returned," she said doubtfully, "with Linda."

He stepped back and pulled the curtain so the vamp could see Linda. Kate stared past Mac toward the ghoul but her face was emotionless. I couldn't tell if seeing that her ghoul was really captured was affecting her at all.

"Congratulations," she said finally.

"Are you going to cooperate now?" Mac asked almost kindly.

"Why should I? You're just going to kill us both." She turned and walked back toward the cot where she sat down.

"Not necessarily," Mac denied. When Kate shot him a skeptical look, he added, "Eliza might kill you."

"Eliza wants to kill you," I told her with a smile.

"What did you do to Linda to make her actually believe she is Natasha's mother?" he demanded.

She smiled and looked at me contemptuously. "You know how it is with ghouls, you can make them believe anything you want them to, even the truth."

"Who is Natasha?"

"Linda's daughter," she replied before turning away.

"No she's not."

"Ask Linda," she suggested.

"I already have."

"Then she's told you."

"How much mind fucking did it take to get them to believe that?" he asked harshly. "She believes that Natasha is her daughter the same way that she believes Eliza was."

Kate looked at him in surprise. "Why do you think it took mind fucking for that?"

"Because it's not the truth," he reminded her.

"She always thought it was." She shrugged and smiled smugly. "Of course she's never been real stable."

"Where did you find Linda?"

"Atlanta," she said as if it wasn't important.

"Has she always been psycho?"

"Maybe it's the company she's been with lately," she drawled. "She's been with you the last few days."

"Come now Kate," he said reasonably. "I was trying to be serious, have a rational discussion."

"You?" she demanded. "Rational?"

"I was thinking the same thing about you," he replied calmly. "So you found a weak one to take care of your children."

"Weak ones make good servants," she told him, glancing pointedly at me.

That pissed me off, but it didn't seem to affect Mac at all. "Did she have any family that would miss her?"

"Do you?" she barked.

"Yes. So who is Natasha?"

"Do we have to go over this?" she groaned mockingly.

"Yes."

She walked back toward the glass slowly. "You know, you would think you would learn the first two or three times that she is Linda's daughter."

"It is not possible," he insisted.

"Who says?" she drawled, running a finger down the glass. "It's not possible for a vampire to have a child."

"No, it is possible."

"Then who's to say it's not possible for a ghoul to have a child?"

He watched her carefully, but she seemed very calm. "It's never been heard of."

She shrugged. "Wasn't heard of for a Kindred to have a child until fifty years ago."

At that he smiled. "Oh, you think you were the first?"

"No, I'm not thinking I was the first," she said harshly, "but it wasn't exactly common."

"Thank you," he said mockingly. "I may be famous amongst Kindred society for discovering something new." When she frowned, he added, "Well, you didn't think anyone will believe a psycho bitch like you, do you?"

Her laugh cut across my nerves like broken glass. "You are so funny."

"They might let me kill you just for that." He reached out to touch a panel on the wall and the glass dimmed a little. I assumed he'd made it a mirror from her side.

"Promises, promises," she drawled.

ARRANGEMENTS

AND ALL THE GAMES I HAVE TO PLAY
I GOT TO GIVE A LOT OF ME AWAY
BUT THE PART WITH US WILL NEVER BE FOR SALE
I DON'T NEED A HERO - CONCRETE BLONDE

Mac seemed a little irritated as he led me upstairs to the main floor. Ford was busy and Micky was out on patrol, but Elvira had left word that she could be disturbed so we walked through the library to her office.

"Be good," he said softly just before ignoring my innocent look and knocking on the door.

When Elvira called out for us to enter, we did. She was sitting at a table with Zane in the middle of the room. The other Kindred had a large old book open in front of him and it was pretty clear we'd interrupted a studying session.

I hadn't had many dealings with Zane, but I didn't like him. He seemed too smooth for my tastes, always catering to the prince. It didn't help matters that he watched me like a cat watches a mouse that has caught its eye. It reminded me of Wolfgang, a Gangrel in Berlin who'd wanted to bite me.

"Ah, Cormac," the prince said warmly. "Come in."

"My prince," he said as he bent to kiss her ring. "How are you this evening?"

"Fine, and how are you?"

"Well."

"Did you get our new occupant settled in?"

"For the moment."

She glanced at me for the first time. "Any problems?"

"She's being about as cooperative as Kate is," he told her.

"I'm not really surprised about that," she drawled softly. "How was your trip?"

"Uneventful."

She smiled. "You almost sound disappointed about that."

"I almost am," he admitted. "It was a little anticlimactic, Linda put up almost no struggle whatsoever."

"Would you prefer that she had?" she asked. "It's hard to get information from a body."

"She's not forthcoming as it is."

"Did you try to Dominate?"

"Not yet," he told her. "Given how it worked with Kate I reasoned it would be equally as useless on Linda."

"You could try," she suggested.

"I'll wait until the effects of the tranquilizers wear off a little more."

"Yes, I hear she didn't take to that too well."

"No, not as such." He glanced at Zane for a moment. "Any new developments within the city in my absence?"

"Everything is going smoothly," she told him.

"Getting back to our guests, we may need to step up the questioning process a little bit," he said quietly.

She seemed intrigued. "What would you suggest?"

"More violence," he replied simply. "Kate is not forthcoming to reasoning, although I will try one token of good faith with her tomorrow evening. I don't know how well she'll take to it."

"What did you have in mind?"

"Well, before we left I struck a tentative deal with her that if she started helping me I would get her some warm blood." When she raised an eyebrow, he added, "Not extra, just warmed, as a token of good faith. She attempted to help us, we didn't need it as it turned out."

The idea seemed to please the prince. "You were thinking microwave or rat?"

"Microwave."

She nodded. "Let me know if it works."

"I don't know how well it will work," he replied. "I think she was steering toward the more blood aspect, but that's not what she said."

"She'll be so disappointed," Elvira drawled. "What did you have in mind as far as the violence was concerned?"

"As I said, reasoning is not working with her," he said thoughtfully. "She knows that if she pisses us off, eventually we'll kill her, so maybe we need to start a little bit of the physical torture, or a little more of it. Maybe start some with Linda as well, she's not real forthcoming either and there are a few things that I have learned of a few memories of Linda's that Kate has tampered with."

"It's not surprising."

"From what Kate says, Linda wasn't very stable to begin with," Mac added.

"Also not surprising." She sat back in her chair and steepled her hands in front of her face thoughtfully.

"I'm not sure what all we can get out of her."

"Without making her a raving lunatic," she murmured.

"She already is," he said firmly.

"Well, how much information do you think that they have that we want?" she asked.

"We may want to think about withholding blood from her even more," he suggested. "Not to the point of torpor, but maybe giving it to her every second or third day as a necessity, and beyond that giving it to her as a reward."

The prince nodded. "Combine that with torture it might work."

"Something to break her."

"Do you think that torturing Linda would break Kate?" she asked, dropping her hands to her lap and sitting forward in the chair.

"It's possible, given her reaction when I apprehended Linda."

"Well, do what you feel necessary," she told him, "short of killing them, for now."

He smiled but it was a hard smile. "For now?"

"I don't have too much patience left for her," she replied coolly. "I'm not sure how important it is to know what it is we need from her, but we'll give it a little more time, a week

or so. If we can't get anything out of them by then there will be no need to keep them around."

"As you wish," he said respectfully. He looked so pleased I'm surprised he didn't start dancing.

"Anything else?" she asked.

"No, I've taken enough of your time," he assured her. "I'll make the arrangements to withhold the blood tomorrow so I can warm it and try that path first, once."

"Let me know if you have any luck," she said dryly, but I could tell she didn't think he would.

He gave her a small bow. "As you wish. Good evening my prince."

"Good evening," she replied before turning back to Zane and his book.

It didn't take long for Mac to make the arrangements for Kate's next feeding. I followed Mac home in the Charger to drop off our luggage, and thankfully no one else was home.

"Was there anything you wanted to do tonight, luv?" he asked as he put his bags on the bed. "Other than kill Kate and Linda."

"Oh, no, that's first on my list," I assured him. "Kate anyway." I wasn't sure we needed to kill Linda, but that wasn't my call.

"You heard the prince," he said softly. "Have patience."

"I'll have patience if you tell me I can kill her," I replied, coming close enough to him to play with his tie.

"We'll see," he told me with a grin.

"I didn't really have anything in mind," I admitted. "Corrine did want us to visit her later."

"Ah, you're just at my beck and call," he drawled.

I smiled up at him and leaned closer. "I'm just your beck and call girl."

He tucked my hair behind my ear. "That comes out wrong every time."

I laughed. "Well, you know I don't have a job," I reminded him, "other than the security, I don't have a car—"

"You do," he interrupted.

"Not officially," I added. Having the Charger would be nice, but I didn't want to count on it.

"Well, until I can speak with Micky on it you do," he told me. "I'm going to go talk to my sister, I don't know if you want to..."

"I can find something else to do, really," I said quickly, probably much too quickly. "I could go shopping. I could do something, anything."

"Study Latin," he suggested.

Like I wanted to do that one alone. I'd wait until we could do it together, it would be much more interesting. "I could go shopping."

"Don't you have enough black jeans and tank tops?" he asked dryly.

I laughed because that was the clothes I was most comfortable in. "No."

"Buy something nice then," he ordered.

"Okay." I gave him a quick hug and a kiss, then left before he could change his mind about letting me out alone.

Don't get me wrong, I love Mac. I just didn't like living in his pocket all of the time. Then there was the fact that just being with him made the base of my spine tingle, and not from love. For years that tingle had told me I was in danger, and it was hard to make the adjustment, although I was dealing with it.

It felt good to be alone and have no one telling me to behave. I didn't have to worry about being nice to anyone, or saying the wrong thing, or tiptoeing around anything. I drove through town to the nearest department store.

There was only one thing I needed, and it didn't take me long to find in the housewares section. It was more expensive than I'd figured, but then again I wasn't watching pennies like I used to so I bought it anyway.

Sleeping with Mac was nice except for two things. I knew I couldn't do anything about the fact that he didn't move during the day, but the coldness of his body could be dealt with. I figured the electric blanket I bought should do the job quite nicely.

GUILT

YOU'RE NOT THE EASIEST PERSON I EVER GOT TO KNOW
AND IT'S HARD FOR US BOTH TO LET OUR FEELINGS SHOW
IT'S PROBABLY ME - STING

When I left the store I found myself worrying about Mac and Siofra. The last time they'd been together, they hadn't exactly been on the best of terms. And Mac had said something about a dream she'd visited him in that was less than pleasant.

The more I thought about it the more I wondered if I shouldn't have gone with him just to make sure he stayed safe. For real now, Siofra was a hunter after all, and just because Glenn seemed reluctant to hurt Mac didn't mean his wife would be.

I figured I knew where he was meeting her, so I drove by Jester's just to see. Sure enough, his bike was parked in the park next to the bar. I pulled into a spot between two cars in the Jester's lot and turned the engine off.

There were faint sounds coming from Jesters, but I tuned those out fairly easily. It only took a moment for me to find Mac and his sister in the darkness of the park, and not much longer to focus in on their conversation.

"I don't think he'd want us at each other's throats like this," Siofra said sadly.

I watched Mac slide a little closer and put his arm around his sister. "No, he wouldn't, he agreed with a sad smile and a chuckle. "At least not without him here to goad us on."

She put her head on his shoulder and made a sound too low for me to recognize. "Aye, he'd be in the middle of it sure enough. I can almost hear him now, tellin' us we were fools not to trust in destiny."

From the sad note in both their voices, I figured they were talking about Angus.

Mac laughed softly. "Look where 'destiny' got us."

"We went from a socialite and a vampire hunter to a vampire hunter and a vampire," she murmured. "What a sad state of affairs this is, certainly not what I expected twenty years ago."

"What did you expect twenty years ago?"

She lifted her head from his shoulder and looked off into the park. For a moment I thought she saw me, but she lit a cigarette and turned back to her brother.

"Twenty years ago I was a silly girl who'd seen way too many movies," she said wistfully. "I thought I'd marry Tom Riley and have a dozen kids. I thought you would come to your senses about living in America and come home. I thought we'd all live in Galway forever and that nothing bad would ever dare touch our family." Her voice went hard and she almost sounded like Mac when he went into 'Cormac mode'. "I was a fool."

"No, not a fool," he replied gently. "Just innocent in how the world works. Galway was our paradise. But like me, once you got a taste of what the world was really like..." His words trailed off with a sigh and he shook his head sadly. "It changed us all."

"There is a lot of evil out there, Mac," she told him firmly. "I can't just go home and forget I know the truth about what the world is like. I have to do something to change things. I can't be like I was."

"That's the same way I felt," he admitted sadly. "There is too much evil in the world to fight it all. The best bet is to find someone special, and protect them with your life." He looked

at her for a moment, then added, "Eliza didn't fail to protect me, I thought I had failed to protect her. That was why I accepted Dougal's 'gift'."

"You thought— didn't you know what she was?" she asked, sounded as shocked as I felt at the bombshell Mac had just dropped. "Didn't she tell you? Glenn was sure she had, in her mind he said she had."

"Yes, I knew what she was," he told her. "But true love is not always the most level headed of things. Despite knowing what she was, and what she was capable of doing, I still felt, and feel, as if I had failed her."

His voice dropped, and I had to strain to hear him. "And knowing what I do now, I feel as if I failed Corrine as well. Someone else had to make sure she grew up safe. I left Eliza heartbroken, lost, and pregnant, and I have spent every moment since regaining those memories trying to figure out how to put things right with the two of them."

Was that all I was to him? Something to put right? Someone he'd failed in the past and some how had to make things up to? Oh, we had some things to talk about, he and I. I couldn't let him go on thinking I'd spent the last twenty years of my life devastated because I thought he was dead. I'd survived well enough without him even if it was true.

"And then I go and start a fight with you." He shook his head regretfully. "I don't need to feel like I've let anymore loved ones down, they are enough guilt for my two lifetimes."

Guilt: was that all he felt for me?

Siofra smiled. "As much as I hate to admit it, Eliza did a good job looking after the girl, she's strong if nothing else. And I've seen what happened, remember? You did everything you could to stop them, Mac," she assured him. "Sometimes magic isn't enough. If what happened wasn't her fault, then it's not yours either."

She sat up straight and when she spoke her voice was thick with her native accent. "Destiny, don't ya know?" She smiled again and took his hand as he laughed, the tone of her voice changing a bit. "And don't be thinkin' you let me down, Macalister. You're the nicest blood-sucking fiend I've ever met."

"Oh?" he asked, his voice soft, teasing, and full of the same accent. "Have ya taken the time to talk to a lot of 'em before ya killed 'em?"

She chuckled and shook her head. "Not too many. All I ever thought about was paying them back for what happened to you. I never much cared for discussing the finer points of life with any of them." She flicked her cigarette out into the darkness and added in a dry voice, "I suppose I might have gotten further asking them if they'd met you instead of destroying them."

"Ya might have," he agreed, glancing down at his watch. "Well Sprite, I have kept you from your husband long enough."

"Aye, it's getting late and I've a few things to do yet tonight." They stood up and she turned to look at him. "I'm glad you called, Macalister, I'm glad we had a chance to settle things."

"Aye."

They hugged and said their good-byes, and Siofra started walking toward me. She was mumbling something I couldn't understand under her breath, but a moment later a gateway opened in front of her. She walked through and disappeared. Once she was gone I could see that Mac had sat back down on the bench and was smoking a cigarette looking very relaxed.

I wasn't sure if Mac would be too happy to see me, but then again I was mad enough that I didn't know if I cared. He felt guilty about Corrine and me? Damn, that was a good one. It was my fault Mac was a vamp, my fault that Corrine had grown up without him, my fault that everything had turned out the way it had.

I couldn't let him keep thinking he was to blame in any way. In all my life he'd never failed me. I was the one who'd failed him and Corrine over and over during the past twenty years.

I had to tell him how wrong he was. I got out of the car and stood there for a minute, still not sure if he'd want me to show up out of the blue like this. Still, if he was going to be mad then at least we'd have a good fight. I shoved my hands in my pockets and started across the park.

Despite the leaves everywhere, it wasn't hard for me to move quietly. One of the first things you learn when you start hunting or hiding is that making noise is a bad thing. Now silence is as instinctive to me as breathing, especially with vamps around. Okay, Mac was the only vamp there, but still.

When I got halfway across the park I stopped. What the hell was I supposed to say, I just happened to show up because I don't trust your sister and oh, hey, I listened to your private conversation with her too. How could I tell him he was wrong when I shouldn't even have been listening in the first place?

Then it didn't matter if I thought I should show myself, he saw me. When he got up and started walking toward me, I met him half way on the path.

"Hello luv," he said softly. "Is everything all right?"

I put my hand over his heart just to make sure there were no holes in his suit. "No stakes?" I asked, looking up at him and feeling the smooth unbroken fabric.

He chuckled. "Did you really expect her to try and kill me?" When he got a good look at my face, he added seriously, "Don't answer that. Is something wrong?"

Wrong? What could be wrong? Other than my being a guilt trip for him, of course. "Just making sure you weren't hurt," I told him.

I wondered again if I should say something about what I'd heard him tell Siofra, but then my temper got the better of me. Some things just have to be said, you know? With a quick motion I pushed him backward a few steps to get his attention.

"I am not something to 'put right'," I told him firmly, ignoring his hand that reached inside his jacket for a weapon. If he pulled a gun I was just angry enough to take it away from him. "I am not something to feel guilty over. I am a grown woman and I take responsibility for my actions. What happened in Baltimore was my fault, not yours. You didn't fail me, I failed you. And Corrine is my responsibility, not yours. I took care of her and you have no reason to feel guilty over *anything* that has ever happened to me or her, got it?"

I wanted to stop because my voice was shaking and there were tears in my eyes, but there was one more thing I had to say. "It was me, everything was me. My fault, not yours." I turned away from him and hugged my stomach, trying very hard not to cry. This wasn't the time or the place for tears. I tried to bring my anger to the front of my mind, but the hurt I felt was overwhelming.

"I never said I 'felt' guilty over you," he told me softly, moving up behind me. "I do feel guilty for not trying to go to you to make sure you weren't dead, for accepting Dougal's gift so quickly." His voice started getting harder, sounding more like the Cormac I'd met in Guilty

Pleasures a few months ago. "I never said I did fail you either, or that you failed me. If you are going to spy on me, luv," he added, his voice stone cold, "at least get what I say right."

"I wasn't spying," I insisted without turning around. I tried to keep my voice firm, but it was hard to do while I was holding back tears. "I was trying to make sure you were safe. Glenn and Bobby could have been here with her for all I knew. How was I supposed to know the two of you would make up so easily?"

"Thank you for your concern," he said, his voice warming just a little, "but if they wanted to attack me, they would have done so by now. God knows they've had opportunities."

"Really?" I asked doubtfully, brushing the tears from my eyes. I didn't like the politeness in his tone. It made me feel like I really wasn't anything more than a puppy to him. "When have they been around without me right there? They both know I'd die before I let anything happen to you again."

"Attacking me without you there runs the same risk as doing it with you there," he reminded me, "because they know you would come after them."

Damn right I would. "And don't go all polite on me, Cormac," I told him harshly as I turned to face him. "I don't want your courtesy." I wanted anger, fire. I wanted my Mac who loved me enough to be pissed at my behavior.

"Fine." He took a step closer until he was right in my face. If he'd been anyone else I would have moved away or struck out in anger, but I didn't move. "Don't ever attack me like that again, Elizabeth," he warned me roughly, "or one of us won't be walking away from it. Understand?"

I didn't like it, but I nodded to show I understood. If it came down to that, I knew I'd never be able to hurt him, ever. He'd be the one walking away.

"What I think of and feel towards the past is not something I can control," he continued irritably, not giving me a chance to say anything, "nor is it something I will apologize for! Regardless of whose fault it was, or wasn't, we cannot change it, we can only make the best of what we have." His voice was hard, but it wasn't the Cormac voice I hated so much. In fact, I liked hearing the emotion in his voice, it told me how much he loved me.

"And you had your chance to come along with me tonight," he added me angrily. "If you were so 'worried' about my safety, why didn't you accept the invite instead of spying on me?"

"I wasn't spying on you!" I snapped, more than frustrated. "For real now, I didn't want to deal with Siofra, but the more I thought about it, the more I didn't like the situation so I came by to check it out, that's all." Couldn't he get it straight?

"I know all about living with things you can't change, Mac, I've been doing it my whole life," I added harshly. Who was he to lecture me about things we had to live with? He wasn't the one who'd had to live with the memories of Baltimore for the last twenty years. He'd forgotten everything in the moment of his death.

Damn, I didn't want to argue with him anymore. We'd cleared the air on some things that should have been said a long time ago. It was time for the making up part.

"I just wanted to make sure you were safe, that's all." I told him softly, leaning in a little closer but not quite touching him. I wanted to, I wanted rest my head on his shoulder and relax against him, but I waited to see if he was ready to make up too.

"I am fine luv," he replied, his voice softening as he reached up and touched my hair lightly. "Don't worry about Siofra anymore. I think we have all come to terms with the way things are."

He was probably right about that, but I still wasn't sure I could bring myself to trust her. I closed my eyes at his touch for the space of a heartbeat, maybe two. I could have stayed that way forever, but my spider-sense started tingling.

I looked over Mac's shoulder to see three figures coming toward us out of the darkness of the park. My gut told me that two of them were vamps, so the third was probably a puppy. I dropped a stake from my sleeve into my hand, then rested them both on Mac's chest as I leaned up close to his ear.

"Kindred," I breathed softly, "behind you."

He trailed his right hand down the side of my face and neck, then slipped it into his jacket. "Who?"

As they moved closer, I could identify them. "Malachi and his 'honey'," I whispered, disgusted. My view of vamps had changed a lot over the last two months, but I didn't think there was anything that would make me like the Brujah Primogen. Then I saw who was with them. "And as a special bonus surprise, the bite happy Rob French" I added, my voice hard. "Brujah."

Rob and I had gotten into a bit of a disagreement shortly after I'd moved to Salem. He lost and he still wasn't happy about that fact. Yeah, I'd staked him, but at least I hadn't left him out for the sunrise. He hadn't seemed to appreciate that fact.

Mac spun me around. "Get to the car," he ordered, pushing me along.

Once I realized he was coming with me, I walked quickly toward the Charger. There was a group of people coming out of Jester's, and they were making too much noise for me to hear the Brujah behind us, but I could still feel them.

As we got into the car, I could see the Brujah coming out of the park. They looked at us curiously, but when Rob said something to Malachi, the primogen showed a bit more interest in us as I was starting the car.

"Pull out," Mac told me. "I need to get my bike."

"Is there a reason that you didn't want to talk to the Brujah?" I asked as I pulled out of the parking lot.

"There is only one kind of language that they truly understand," he reminded me. "And I wasn't about to let anything start here."

I had to agree with him, we were too close to humans to be starting or finishing anything with the Brujah. I pulled around the block and into the lot where his bike was, parking next to it with the engine running. Across the park I could see Malachi's car leaving the Jester's lot.

I glanced at Mac. "What now?"

"We go home," he told me. "We should change before meeting Corrine."

He leaned over and gave me a quick kiss. I cupped the side of his face gently, glad that he wasn't going to hold my fit against me. I watched him walk to his bike and waited for him to pull away before I followed him. We drove quickly through the dark streets of Salem to the Bathori Mansion.

FORGIVENESS

I'M SO GLAD YOU DECIDED TO COME
ANOTHER DAY AND I COULD'VE GONE MAD
COULD'VE GONE MAD - DOE

When I came back from the bathroom a few minutes later, Mac handed me his phone and told me to call our daughter. I'd changed and put my hair up, which he seemed to like even though he didn't say anything about it.

"Hey what's going on?" Corrine asked when I reached her.

"Were you expecting someone else to call?" She'd sounded a little disappointed when she realized it was me.

"No, why?"

"Because you sounded so up when you first answered the phone," I told her, "and then you found out it was me."

"No, I'm sorry, pot of coffee syndrome I guess," she laughed softly. "I've had a free afternoon and I'm trying to catch up on a lot of shit."

I let it go. "Well, Mac wanted me to call and let you know that we have some free time if you're free."

"Yeah, have you eaten any?" she asked.

"No, not since before sundown." It was after ten now, and my stomach was reminding me it had been a while since I'd filled it.

"Well if you're hungry I can throw together something," she offered.

"If it's not a problem."

"Oh, no problem, I've kind of got the munchies myself."

"Okay." I'd missed having our standing Sunday dinners, Corrine was a good cook and of course I loved spending time with her. "I guess we'll be there maybe fifteen or twenty minutes."

After we said our good-byes, I turned to see that Mac was ready to go. "She's making food," I told him with a smile. "Just in case we're hungry." Like he was going to get much out of it.

He chuckled. "That's awful thoughtful of her."

I dangled my car keys. "Are you ready?"

"Can I drive?" he asked, sounding almost like a little boy.

"Like you wouldn't," I murmured, trying not to smile.

"Well we're taking your car."

"Aren't you the boss?" I reminded him.

"We're not in the chantry," he shot back good-naturedly, "therefore, no." That was the arrangement we had, in the chantry he was undeniably the boss, and his word was law. Out of the chantry, everything was up to discussion.

"I guess you can drive, I'll let you," I drawled, stepping closer to him. "If you're nice to me later."

He gave me a hot look that made me laugh as he took the keys from my hand.

The streets were dark and nearly empty as Mac raced through them. He put the car through its paces, really laying it on. I was glad there were no cops around, and sat back to enjoy the ride.

Corrine complemented me on my hair as she let us in. There were candles lit everywhere, and I could smell food from the kitchen. It woke my appetite and made me impatient to eat.

"Come in," she told us. "Make yourselves at home. The nachos are almost ready, other refreshments are coming, although I can get something for you Mac right now if you want."

"I'm fine," he told her.

"Are you sure?" she asked pointedly. "I have something special for you."

"I'll bite," he drawled. "What do you have?"

"Just a minute."

She hurried into the kitchen and we followed more slowly. I could smell the blood as we turned the corner to see her pouring a glass of the stuff for him.

"If you want you can nuke it," she offered uncomfortably. "I really don't know..."

I glanced at Mac. "Do you nuke it?" I'd never asked him if he preferred his blood bags warm.

"No, not in here," he said dryly as he took the blood from Corrine. "It would ruin the glass." He tasted it hesitantly, then took a long swallow. He half tipped the glass in my direction as if offering me some of it.

"That's not amusing," I hissed quietly.

Corrine was stirring something on the stove and didn't hear me. "So I hear you're racking up those frequent flier miles."

"Yes, it's been a hectic few weeks," Mac told her.

"So you've been studying?" I asked softly.

"Yes I have," she said firmly. "Yes."

"And how's it going?" Mac asked.

"It's going," she replied. "And going, and going. This is almost done."

I glanced over her shoulder. "Whatcha making?"

"Nachos," she said, stirring the concoction in the pan. "I had everything and it was really fast."

Mac took another drink of the blood and looked at her questioningly. "So how is studying going?"

"It's hard, very hard," she admitted. "It's mind numbing, sometimes insane, borderline I want to pull my hair out, but its going."

That didn't sound good. "So it's not going well?"

"Oh, it's going well," she assured me. "I'm learning new tricks, don't get me wrong."

"What have you learned?" Mac asked.

"I can read some surface thoughts and emotions," she replied almost shyly. When he looked at her expectantly, she narrowed her eyes and studied him for a long minute. Finally she smiled. "Well, maybe I can have a heater installed and we can put it in that way."

He grinned. "Very good."

No, it wasn't good. The last thing I needed was for my daughter to be able to read my mind. I worked at keeping my mind carefully blank.

"But of course that's something that you only use when you really need it," she said firmly. "I've done some simple healing and things like that."

"Yes, I seem to remember that," he told her.

She tried for an innocent look, but didn't quite make it. "I've done a little quintessence sensing I tried to do a little fate sensing but that didn't work."

"That's because there is not such thing as fate," he replied coolly.

She laughed. "That's funny."

"I don't believe in it," he added. "Never did."

That only made her laugh again.

"And there's something funny about fate?" I murmured.

"No, not really I guess," she replied, trying to contain her amusement.

"Then what's so funny?"

"I just—" She stopped and looked at Mac. "Did you ever meet Glenn's mother? Do you remember meeting Glenn's mother?"

"No, she died before I knew of him," he told her, "but I knew of her."

"So you knew that she was the seer of her generation?"

"I've heard other terms, but yes," he admitted.

"Through visits of my avatar in my dreams," she said softly, "I have learned who the seer is for this generation."

"And it is?"

"I know her," she replied with a smile. "It's Samantha Brown."

Samantha was Rafe's sister and one of the girls who had been at Mother Abigail's the night it had been attacked by the Sabbat.

"Yes, I know her," he murmured.

"So I just found your comment funny," she added as we heard a knock on the door. "Oh, excuse me."

Mac stiffened a little. "Are you expecting somebody?"

"Yeah I am actually," she admitted as she headed for the door. "Brian. You've met him."

He downed the rest of the blood in the glass, then rinsed it out in the sink before he looked at me. "Do I have anything in my teeth?"

I laughed, happy to be with him like this, to see him so much at ease. It didn't bother me anymore that he was a vampire, although sometimes it bothered me that it didn't. I was still laughing when Corrine and Brian walked into the kitchen.

We said hi to Brian, and I noticed that he seemed pretty comfortable in Corrine's kitchen. She poured me a glass of Coke, and when she offered Mac some wine, I had to laugh again, although Brian didn't seem to understand why I found that funny.

"Am I missing something here?" he asked as Corrine opened a cabinet door and took down three wine glasses.

"No," she told him firmly.

"I could tell you," Mac drawled jokingly, "but then I'd have to kill you."

When I noticed that Corrine was pouring herself a glass of the wine, I asked if she was planning on going anywhere. She wasn't quite old enough to drink legally.

"At least not driving anyway," Mac added.

"No," she assured us. "Why don't you guys go out into the living room area and Eliza and I will finish up in here."

Mac shot her a surprised look, as if he hadn't expected her to leave the two of them alone.

"The remote's on the coffee table if you want to turn on the TV, and there's lots of CDs, make yourselves comfortable," she told them as she started getting down plates and bowls.

She handed me a head of lettuce. "Can you break this lettuce up into small bite sized pieces?"

Break it up? Wasn't it faster to cut it up? I took a knife down from the rack and started cutting.

She kept herself occupied for a few minutes, then finally cleared her throat. "I just wanted to apologize for the misunderstanding of a few weeks ago," she said softly, not looking at me.

I put the knife down and turned to face her. "It's not for you to apologize Corrine," I told her honestly. "I'm sorry." It had been my fault.

"Well I know how you are," she replied gently, "and it just came at a really bad time and I'm sorry that I took it the wrong way."

"Like I said, it was my fault," I protested. "I should have come up with a better way to tell you." I walked over to her, searching for some sign of how she really felt about the whole mess. Her aura told me that she was sad, and revealed something else I'd really been expecting to find. Corrine was in love, and I was betting she was in love with Brian.

I laid a hand on her arm and she finally looked at me. "You know I love you and there's nothing that you can do that would change that," I told her softly. "I'm sorry that I upset you."

"It's okay," she replied. "It's not a big, can we just forget about it?"

"If that's what you want."

She nodded and turned away, taking a deep breath. "So, this is ready," she called out after a minute.

I put the lettuce I'd cut in a bowl and helped her get everything on the table. The guys came in and we all sat down to eat. Well, some of us did. Mac and Corrine didn't eat very much, but Brian and I more than made up for it.

Brian asked me about the apartment and I talked to him about it while Mac and Corrine discussed the book I'd given her. He seemed a little surprised that she would mention it in front of Brian, but he told her what she asked about.

The four of us kept talking even after we were done eating, and it was nice. I liked Brian, and I was glad to see her involved again. Her last boyfriend had been a loser I'd had to chase off when she was sixteen.

"So are you going to be in town for a while?" she asked me when the conversation drifted off.

I looked at Mac, not really sure of the answer to that.

"I believe we're going to stay in town for a while," he told her. "We have some matters here to resolve."

"Okay," she said with a smile. "We'll probably see you then when we get back from Maine."

He glanced at me as I remembered the phone number we still hadn't checked out. "Although we do need to go to Bar Harbor for something," he added.

"Oh, what for?" Brian asked.

"We have something to investigate in that area," he murmured, suddenly business-like. "Nothing of major concern."

"Is that something you'll be looking into soon?" Corrine asked.

"Ah, no," he replied. "I don't suppose it will be of grave importance."

I tried not to laugh at his play on words. "So you're going up for the carnival?"

"Yes, the end of season carnival is this weekend," she said excitedly, looking at Brian. "Mom's like flipping."

I saw Mac glance at me as if looking for a reaction, but I'd had nineteen years of hearing Corrine call someone else 'mom' and I knew by now how to hide the hurt it gave me.

"You know she's got the big preserve action going on," she continued, "driving dad out of house and home through the whole process of canning and everything else."

I smiled, remembering exactly what that had been like. "She does can well. You could bring back some preserves," I said hopefully.

"I'm sure she's got tons to spare," she replied. "The 'not available for consumption' jars that weren't quite good enough to make it."

"Make sure you pull all of those out of the trash and bring them home to me," I told her. Martina usually ended up throwing away a third of the jars she made, and I'd always made it a point to rescue them.

"I forgot about that, thanks for reminding me," Corrine laughed. "Mom usually cans enough preserves to feed ten families for a year."

"She cut back a few years ago," I told the men. "It used to be more."

We talked for a little while longer before I noticed it was after midnight and suggested we go.

"Yeah, I have to meet Jared tomorrow at ten," she murmured. "The four hour killer sessions."

"Is he teaching you Latin?" I asked, looking pointedly at Mac.

He was looking at his daughter with an amused look on his face. "Is that all? Try growing up on the farm."

"Four hours three days a week," she told him.

He smiled. "Is that all?"

"And school two days a week," she said defensively. "Plus all the ritual preparation and..."

"Try living on the farm," he repeated.

"Are you kidding?" she demanded. "That would be easy."

He raised an eyebrow at her. "With ma and da and Siofra?"

"I'm sure grandfather's not that bad," she told him.

"To you."

"But then there's Siofra," I reminded her.

"Like she has any bearing on me whatsoever," she replied dismissively.

"You're lucky you have time for a social life," he said softly.

She glanced at Brian and smiled. "We have what we make time for."

That was our cue to exit. "So we probably should go," I said firmly. "Not everyone stays up all night."

Corrine shot me a warning look, glancing pointedly at Brian.

"We're both night owls," I told him.

"So is Rafe," he offered. "He seems to have completely switched schedules. He's up most of the night now with Brenda and they have odd hours, I can never keep up."

"It gets easier with time," Mac put in just as I felt a sharp pain in my shin.

When I gasped, Corrine apologized and asked Brian to help her clear the table. When they walked into the kitchen, I whispered to Mac that it was time to go.

"Before the shit hits the fan?" he murmured as he stood up.

"Or something else does something." I stood up and started following him into the living room, but he stopped and looked down at me.

"What is going on?" he demanded softly.

I glanced toward the kitchen. "I'll tell you later."

"Hmm, promise?" he asked, following my gaze.

"If you're nice to me later," I murmured, running a hand down his tie. I laughed at the hard look he gave me.

"When am I not nice to you?"

"At the chantry," I reminded him.

He tried to look offended. "I'm business like at the chantry."

Thankfully Corrine came out of the kitchen right then.

"We're gonna go," I told her.

They walked us to the door and Corrine said she'd call when she got back. Mac and I hugged her, and he shook hands with Brian before we said good night.

"Did you notice that Brian didn't leave?" I asked quietly as he pulled out of the parking lot.

"And your point is?" he replied absently.

"I just thought I'd mention that." I glanced at his face, but I couldn't read it in the dashboard lights. "He probably won't."

"You sound like I should be worried about that fact," he said softly. "Is there something I don't know about that I should be worried about? Something about Brian?"

Where had that come from? "I don't think you should be worried, Brian seems like a nice guy. He's easily dominated and likes Corrine. What more could you want?"

"You sounded like I should be storming back in there." He turned a corner with a sigh. "Like I have some right to tell her how to live her life."

"Like either of us do, really," I said sadly, looking out the window into the darkness. Corrine had made it quite clear that she wanted to live her own life without either of our interference. "I don't want you to go storming up there, I just didn't want you to be surprised later." And he had asked me to tell him what was going on.

"I was just checking."

We rode in silence for a few minutes before I asked when we were going to start torturing Kate.

"Two more nights," he told me. "Are you sure you're going to be able to stomach watching it?"

I smiled. "Watching you torture Kate?" Sounded like fun to me.

"I'll be torturing Linda as well," he reminded me.

That sounded like less fun. "I'll just watch Kate."

"Both or none," he said firmly. "It kind of loses the effect. Torturing Linda is part of the torture of Kate. I hope."

What had Linda ever done for me anyway? She'd tormented my childhood, made me feel like there was something wrong with me when she was the one who had something wrong with her. "Won't be a problem," I told him, hoping it was true.

"Tomorrow we'll start withholding the blood," he murmured. "After I give her the warm blood."

"Whatever you say," I replied. "You're the boss."

Once we got back to the house we worked on my Latin for a while, but we didn't get very far. Mac finally gave up and called Micky.

He cleared us keeping the car, and said he'd make sure that no one was to visit Linda or Kate for any reason, even feeding. He also assured Mac that no one would enter the rooms, and even said that he had someone reviewing the security tapes to find out if anyone had been giving Kate blood.

Near dawn we went to bed and I slept better than I had in weeks.

MANEUVERING

BEFORE YOU LET ANOTHER LIE
SLIP THROUGH THOSE CROOKED LITTLE TEETH
I DON'T THINK YOU WANNA START THAT SHIT WITH ME
NOT A VIRGIN - POE

Kate was restless when we showed up the next night with a warm bag of blood for her, and a plate of food for Linda. Mac watched the Kindred pace her cell for a few minutes before he finally cleared the glass so she could see us.

"Good evening Kate," he called softly.

She shot him a wary look. "Cormac."

"How are you feeling this evening?" he asked, his tone making it clear that he really didn't care.

She smiled grimly. "Just peachy."

"Hungry?" he taunted.

"A little," she said with a shrug.

"I figure since you did try and play nice, I would hold up my end of it a little bit." He opened a small door in the glass and put the blood bag on the narrow ledge just inside her cell.

She hurried over and snatched the bag before he had a chance to change his mind. She carried it to the other side of the cell and stood with her back to us while she gulped the liquid down. She even went so far as to squeeze the plastic when she was done, hoping to get every drop out of the bag. When she was done, she looked toward the ledge as if she hoped there would be more waiting for her. There wasn't.

I sat down in a chair and listened with half an ear while Mac questioned her about Natasha. She hedged about it for a little while before she admitted she'd stolen the girl off the street and brainwashed her into believing she was Linda's daughter. And what was her reason for kidnapping the girl?

"Linda needed someone to watch over," she said as if that justified everything. "Natasha gave her something to take care of."

That didn't surprise me. In fact, what surprised me was that she hadn't stolen another child when Natasha had gone off to college.

When Mac started asking about Tom Pennick, Kate got evasive.

"He died in New Jersey in '79," she said finally.

"Did he stay dead after the second time?" Mac asked.

She half smiled. "Most people do."

"So you ghouled him in Atlantic City and Killed him in Jersey," he said softly.

"You can assume that," she said, sounding very amused.

"I'm not assuming anything," he told her. "I'm asking. If he's dead, what does it matter?"

"What makes you think I killed him?" she drawled.

He almost smiled. "Personality quirk."

"Just because I'd kill you if given half a chance," she replied coldly.

"Fine," he bit out irritably. "He died once and you ghouled him, he died again in Jersey. Did he stay dead?"

"He was quite dead the last time I saw him," she said, sounding pleased that she'd pissed Mac off.

"But so am I," he reminded her.

"And look," she drawled, "you stayed dead."

"Is he Kindred?" he demanded

"No." That sounded like the truth, for what it was worth.

"Was he Eliza's father?"

She glanced at me. "Hasn't she told you her father's dead?"

"Tom's dead," he replied.

"What a coincidence."

"Was he?" Mac demanded.

"See, now you're asking personal questions," she chastised him.

"Yes I am. Are you going to answer it?"

"I did," she protested.

"Answer it for me again," he drawled.

No matter what way he asked, Kate avoided answering Mac's questions about Tom. He kept his patience, which was more than I could have done. I'd have staked her from sheer frustration alone.

"We'll come back to that one later then," he said finally. "So who did you kill to lower your generation twice?"

"A vampire," she said, as if that were obvious. Actually, it was.

"Who?"

"A dead one," she replied with a smile. "Finally dead this time. Actually two of them."

"Who were they?" he demanded.

"Kindred who didn't deserve to live."

"Oh, and you were doing so well, Kate," he said softly. "What city were they in?"

"Why do you want to know?" she shot back irritably.

"The prince would like to know," he told her.

"She would, would she?" A slow smile crossed her face. "Why doesn't she come ask me?"

"You are too far beneath her," he informed her, "so I've come in her stead with all the powers and privileges I need to extract the information. This is your last chance to cooperate."

She didn't look intimidated. "Or what?"

"I start torture tomorrow," he said smoothly.

"And that's supposed to scare me?"

"No," he conceded. "Just so you're not surprised tomorrow."

She glanced toward the empty blood bag on the floor. "Maybe if I had more blood I could think more clearly."

"When you think clearly you'll get more blood," he replied calmly.

She turned her back to us and stood looking into a corner for a few minutes. "Nashville," she said finally.

"Both of them?"

"Just one," she told him, turning back to face us.

"Who was it?"

She laughed, the sound sending chills up my spine. I hated it when she laughed like that. "A Brujah no one will miss."

"And the other?" he prompted.

"Kansas City."

"What clan?"

She seemed surprised at the question. "I didn't actually ask."

"What clan do you think?"

She shrugged. "Toreador."

Mac watched her for a minute, looking like he wasn't sure he could believe her. She didn't notice, she was looking past him toward Linda's cell.

"What are you planning on doing with Linda?" she asked softly.

"Torturing her," he replied evenly.

She looked at him in surprise. "I've been cooperating," she protested.

"You haven't told us anything about Tom," he reminded her.

"I've told you a lot," she insisted.

"No you didn't," he said firmly.

She glanced past him again. "Would you let her live if I did?"

"It's not my decision," he told her.

"Oh, here I thought you had the whole power of the clan behind you," she said contemptuously.

"I do."

"Then it sounds like it's your decision."

"I will argue for her life if you cooperate," he told her.

"I am cooperating," she protested again.

"Tell me about Tom," he urged.

She glanced around her cell as if looking for another alternative. "Give me more blood," she demanded.

"Tell me about Tom," he repeated in the same tone.

She sighed. "Tell me she can walk away from this and I'll tell you about Tom."

"I can't guarantee that fully," he told her. "The most I can give you is that I will argue for her life if you cooperate."

"When you can tell me she can walk away from this," she said, meeting his eyes for the first time tonight, "I will cooperate."

"Think about that Kate," he warned her. "You're in no position to make ultimatums."

"What, is it such a hard thing to go ask the prince?" she growled. "What's the big deal? I don't cooperate then you kill her. I cooperate and you let her go."

"Why don't you try cooperating first?" he suggested.

"Because there's no guarantee she can leave," she reminded him. "I want the guarantee."

"I'll talk to her tomorrow then." He reached out and smoked the glass, his patience with her apparently at an end.

"I thought she was being quite cooperative," I murmured as he turned toward Linda's cell.

"She's getting there," he agreed.

"Warm food must have done something for her."

"She was also scared that she wasn't going to get it," he told me as he touched the switch that cleared the glass between Linda and us.

"Could be," I admitted dryly as I shifted in my seat to look into the other cell. "Vamps get hungry, they get edgy."

Linda was sleeping on the cot, looking uncomfortable and hungry even in sleep. Mac had to call her name twice to wake her up, and then she just looked at him and closed her eyes again.

"I have your food," he told her.

That woke her up. She got up quickly and walked to the window just as Mac sat her food down on the ledge inside her cell. She grabbed it and walked to the other side of the room just as Kate had done with the blood bag. We watched as she finished every crumb before she turned around looking for more.

"Who was Natasha?" Mac asked softly.

"Haven't we been over this?" she demanded, licking her fingers.

"We're going to go over it again," he told her firmly.

"She's my daughter."

"You truly believe that, do you?" he asked softly.

"It's the truth," she replied, confused. "Why wouldn't I?"

"Kate told us the truth," he said, his voice cold.

"Then she told you she's my daughter," she insisted.

"No."

She shook her head. "I don't believe you."

"That's your prerogative," he murmured. "Who is Tom Pennick?"

"Who?"

"Tom Pennick," he repeated. "Kate's first ghoul."

She looked away. "I have no idea who you're talking about, I don't recognize the name." It wasn't hard to tell she was lying.

"You know I can tell if you're lying, Linda," he warned her, "and you are."

She just shrugged and put her chin up stubbornly. I sighed; he wasn't going to get anything out of her this way.

"I'm going to ask you once more, then I'm going to leave," he said softly. "When I come back tomorrow, I'll be torturing you. Who is Tom Pennick?"

"I have no idea who you're talking about," she lied again.

"Suit yourself," he told her as he smoked the glass again.

We left the cell and went upstairs. One of the house ghouls told Mac that we could find the prince in the sitting room with Ford, so he led the way in that direction. When he knocked on the door, she called out for us to enter.

She was sitting near the fireplace with her sire, and there was relaxing music being played on the piano by one of her ghouls.

"May I speak with you for a moment my prince?" Mac said respectfully from the doorway. "If you're not busy, of course."

"No, come in please," she told him.

I followed him in and he greeted Ford politely.

"Good evening, young Cormac," Ford murmured.

I tried not to smile.

"I've been down speaking with Kate and Linda," Mac told them.

"How is that going?" Elvira asked softly.

"Kate was quite open about everything except the Tom Pennick subject," he replied. "It appears Natasha was just some unfortunate child they happened to abduct in Atlantic City in 1983. Kate dominated her into believing that Linda was her mother, it appears that she also dominated Linda into believing that Natasha was her birth daughter as Linda believes that to be true."

"That is quite interesting," she murmured. "We'll have to do some research to find out who Natasha actually is."

"I believe she is just some unfortunate who just happened to be in the wrong place," he assured her. "As for who Kate diablerized, one was a Brujah in Nashville, no big loss given the situation in Nashville."

The other vamps smiled and nodded, and I found I had to agree with them. The Brujah in Nashville were far worse than the ones we had to deal with here in Salem.

"The second was from Kansas City," Mac continued. "Kate didn't know its actual clan, she guessed Toreador."

"Sounds like you got quite a bit of information out of her," Elvira said with a satisfied smile.

"As I said she was rather open save for the Tom Pennick subject."

"Which makes one wonder why she's so closed mouthed about that one," she said thoughtfully.

"She did let one piece of information go about him," he added. "He was her ghoul up until his second recorded death. It appears the first record of his death was when she ghouled him."

"That's quite interesting and rather what we expected to hear," she said softly, "but it's unfortunate that she's not being more forthcoming with information about him."

"She is looking to strike a deal in return for that information," he told her.

The prince raised a questioning eyebrow. "What kind of deal?"

"If I can come to her with the promise that we will allow Linda to live, she has agreed to tell me everything about Tom," he explained.

"Live in what fashion," she asked. "As ghoul to someone else or just live?"

"She was not specific in that matter, my prince," he admitted. "She just said that she needed a promise that Linda would live."

"She probably wouldn't live long if we just let her go," Elvira replied dryly.

"No, but if she were to be bonded to someone else..." He didn't have to say she would live indefinitely.

"Do you think the information she has would be of any worth to us?" the prince asked.

Mac shrugged. "What more information were we seeking other than the specifics of Tom?"

"I'm not sure what specifics of Tom that she could give us that would be worth making this type of bargain," she said thoughtfully. "However she thinks it's important enough. What could it be?"

"The only alternative I can come up with is that he is now Kindred," he told the prince.

"And she's still trying to protect him?" She didn't seem to like that idea too much.

"Possibly," he murmured, "given what has happened to her most recent ghoul and what I've threatened to her other ghoul."

"Is she trying to assure the safety of both of them?"

"Not really, she has to give one of them up to us," he reminded her. "She's trying to protect one of them. I don't fear Linda, as I told you yesterday she's, ah, well, fucked in the head. She is rather unstable, but not in a dangerous way."

"And we have no information on Tom to know if he is dangerous," she said thoughtfully.

"Correct. And as Tom is the oldest one of her ghouls..."

She nodded. "Let me think about it this evening."

"As you wish," he said with a slight bow.

"I'll give you an answer about it tomorrow."

"Very well." He replied. "Thank you for your time. My lord."

"Young Cormac," the elder Tremere murmured.

We left the sitting room and went downstairs again. Zora had asked that I give her a blood sample when things settled down, and it looked like things were as settled as they were going to get. It didn't take very long for her to fill up the vial she had ready, and afterward we went out on patrol.

After we got home, I tried to talk Mac into working out with me, but he refused to spar. I didn't really blame him after the last time, but I did insist that he needed to work on his defensive tactics.

We spent a couple of hours practicing avoidance techniques before I got hungry. Mac studied while I ate, then we went to bed. I was asleep by the time the sun came up.

ENDINGS

LET ME INTRODUCE YOU TO THE END

SHACKLED - VERTICAL HORIZONS

Mac packed a bag of what he called 'tools' for our visit to the chantry the next night. Mostly it was weapons and torture implements, but I guess you could call them tools for what he planned to do.

We found the prince in her study writing in a large book. As we walked across the room, she sprinkled sand on the page and closed the book.

"Good evening, my prince," Mac said softly. "I hope I'm not interrupting."

"Not at all," she assured him. "How are you this evening?" She glanced behind him at me and gave me a little smile. I smiled and nodded back.

"Fine, and yourself?" he replied.

"I'm fine, thank you. Have you checked in on our guests this evening?"

"No, I came directly here, my prince," he told her, "to see what decision you had arrived at concerning Kate's proposition."

She sat back in her chair and steepled her hands in front of her chest. "Well, I really don't think that there is any further information that she can give us that we need as far as this Tom Pennick is concerned," she replied thoughtfully, "so making a bargain with her is not important. And is the ghoul as unstable as you suggest, I don't see where she would be of any use to the clan."

She was giving him permission to kill Kate, finally. You know, if they'd just let me do it when I'd wanted to, this could have all been over and done with already.

Mac gave her a half-bow. "Very well, my prince, as you wish."

"I'm sure you're quite capable of taking care of both situations," she added meaningfully.

He nodded. "I'll need someone to help dispose of the remains."

"Jax can help you."

"Is there any particular method my prince would prefer?" he asked, trying not to grin. It wasn't working, I could almost see the delight on his face.

"Use your judgment," she murmured, amused at his attitude.

I hoped his judgment let me be the one to kill Kate. I found myself picturing different ways of doing the deed until something Mac said caught my attention.

"Perhaps if a member or two of the security team were assigned to the chantry on a permanent basis rather than patrolling and waiting for trouble, it may deter this type of action in the future," he suggested softly.

She looked at him in surprise. "Do you have someone in mind?"

"No, my prince, no one specific," he said thoughtfully. "It'd just that there has been one traitor within the chantry while all of us are patrolling the city, there may be others contemplating it. Perhaps if someone high ranked, possibly even Micky, because everyone knows Micky, they know how protective he is of you, as we all should be, and most of us are." Damn, now he was rambling. "And of Ford and Alden, and they others. It may deter them."

"You've made several interesting points," she murmured. "I will have to discuss it with Ford and Micky and perhaps we can take your advice. Sometimes it takes an outsider to see things a little differently."

"As you wish," he replied.

She didn't keep us much longer. When we left the study, he walked quickly through the Library toward the hall.

"Well?" I said softly, trying to keep up.

"She has been very cooperative," he reminded me over his shoulder.

"And your point being?" I demanded.

"Kill Kate as quickly as you can," he told me with a smile, letting me catch up.

"Really?" I mean, I'd hoped that he'd led me do it, but I hadn't been sure he would.

"Quickly," he said firmly.

"Take all the fun out of it," I muttered good-naturedly. As long as he was letting me kill her, I'd do it whatever way he wanted me to.

"Given Kate's resourcefulness, I don't want to take any chances of her not dying."

I chuckled. "Oh, she'll die."

"Quickly," he repeated.

"Okay, quickly," I agreed. "She'll die. Any preference? Can I stake her first or just go in with a sword?"

"My swords are at home, but I'm sure someone here has one," he told me.

"They took my really big knife, so I can't use that." I missed that blade, it had helped me kill a lot of things over the years. "Can I get a long knife or a short sword?"

We went downstairs to the armory and found a short sword that felt good in my hand. It didn't take very long and soon we were on our way to do the deed.

"Should I stake her first," I asked as we walked toward the cells, "or just go in and cut off her head?"

"It's up to you," he replied.

"Decisions, decisions," I murmured. Part of me wanted to draw it out as long as possible, but another part of me just wanted it to be over.

"I could kill her," he said dryly. "Just walk in and shoot her."

"No," I said quickly. "That would be too easy."

"I told you, I want her killed quickly," he said impatiently. "Yes, I'm in a hurry to put this entire situation behind us."

"You're in a hurry? I could have taken care of this a month and a half ago."

"Just go in and kill her," he ordered as Jax joined us outside of Kate's cell.

I laughed softly and sat the sword down against the wall. "Okay, we'll bypass the staking and I'll just go in and kill her," I said as I started pulling off my weapons. I didn't want Kate to have anything in reach that she might be able to use against us.

When I was done piling my weapons on the floor, I picked the sword back up and tested its balance. It was a good sword, and I knew it would work well to separate Kate's head from her body.

"Are you ready?" Mac asked, his hand on the door. When I nodded, he opened it and walked into the cell.

She was sitting on the cot meditating and she seemed surprised to see Mac coming in with his gun drawn. When he stepped aside and let me come in, she stood up. Behind us I heard the door close.

"I spoke with the prince about your proposition," Mac said coldly.

Kate shot a quick glance between the two of us. "She didn't like it, did she?"

"No," he replied. "Goodbye, Kate."

I didn't say anything, just walked closer with the short sword in my hand. As much as I wanted her to suffer for the pain she'd caused Mac and I, killing her quickly was probably better for both of us.

She sidestepped away from me but there was no where for her to go. She knew it was time for her to die, but true to form she tried to talk her way out of it.

"Eliza, are you sure you want to do this?" she demanded, her voice on the edge of hysteria.

My only reply was the sound the sword made as it cut through her neck. Her head rolled away to land near the cot while her body collapsed to the ground.

It was over. Kate was finally dead and she'd never interfere in my life again.

I turned to look at Mac, relief and satisfaction running through my veins. "I feel better. What's for dinner?" I asked cheerfully.

"I have to kill Linda," he reminded me gravely.

I looked toward the smoked glass lining one wall. I hadn't wanted to remember that Elvira had ordered Linda's death too.

"You don't have to watch," he said softly.

"How bout I wait in the hall?" I suggested. I wasn't sure if I could watch her die with the same nonchalance that I'd killed Kate with.

"Linda's won't even be that slow," he promised me.

"It was quick," I protested. Damn, I'd just walked in and killed her, what more did he want from me?

"I'm not going to talk to her," he replied.

"I didn't talk to her," I reminded him. "You talked to her."

He didn't answer me, just turned and walked out into the hall. I followed and watched as he gestured for Jax to follow him into Linda's cell. Thankfully, they closed the door leaving me alone in the hallway.

As I re-armed myself, I waited for the sound of the gunshot that would end Linda's life. In those few moments, I remembered what it had been like to be Linda's 'daughter', always leery of where her hands were, always wondering how much she'd had to drink.

They weren't happy memories; even though she was supposed to have been my mother when I was growing up, she'd always hated me. As the sound of the gun echoed through the hall I shook my head and told myself not to linger in the past. Linda would never hurt me again. She would never hurt anyone again.

Mac rejoined me in the hall with a sigh. "I feel better," he said softly.

"Okay, what's for dinner?" I asked again, trying to recapture my light mood.

"You," Mac told me in a voice that sent chills up my spine.

I grinned. "You feed me, I'll feed you. Food, that is." I didn't want him thinking I wanted blood from him any time soon.

"All right, I guess," he sighed in mock disappointment. Then he grinned down at me. "Where too?"

"Some place other than fast food," I told him. I was sick of hamburgers. "We need to celebrate." Its not every day you get to kill your mother.

"How about the Dragon's Wing?" he suggested.

I'd seen the place from the outside, but never been in it. "Sounds good to me. You buying?"

He stopped and looked down at me. "Don't you have a job?"

"Do I have a salary?"

"I guess I pay you in trade don't I?" he asked with a sly grin. "I'll buy."

I smiled back at him. "I thought the boss was always supposed to buy."

"Not if you're trying to impress the boss."

I stepped closer to him, almost but not quite touching. "Do I have to impress you?"

"You can try," he replied smoothly.

It was my turn for the sly grin. "Maybe after you feed me." When he bared his wrist for me, I grabbed it and pulled it down. "Food, Mac, food," I reminded him, trying hard not to laugh.

He growled playfully. "Fine." He took my hand and started for the stairs.

I laughed, feeling better than I had in a long time.

Yeah, Linda was dead, but I really hadn't expected her to live through her time in the chantry dungeon. She'd never been much of a mother to me, but I did feel bad that Natasha would never know what happened to her.

And Kate was dead, finally. Her death wouldn't bring Mac's humanity back to him, but it did even the score. Mac and I were together and Kate would never come between us again.

PICKET FENCES

MY LIFE IS YOURS ALONE

THE ONLY LOVE I'VE EVER KNOWN

MY EVERYTHING - 98°

Over the next few nights we patrolled the streets and spent time at the chantry. It seemed like every time I turned around Zora wanted to try something new on me and they took blood several times for 'study'. I didn't ask what they were doing with it.

Zora insisted we finish the tests that I hated so much, the IQ test. She kept telling me I could do it and I wanted nothing more than to stake her so she'd leave me alone, but I cooperated. I didn't really have a choice, did I?

The night we finally finished those tests, Mac showed up at the lab just as we were finishing up. Zora took the papers and excused herself to disappear into her office and Mac put his arm around me. Problem was I wasn't in the mood to be warm and fuzzy, I had a headache and needed some fresh air.

"Hello luv," he drawled.

I shot him an irritated look, but I put my arm around his waist. "Can we get out of here? I think my brain is going to explode."

He laughed. "Sure. I have a surprise for you."

The tone of his voice caught my interest. "What?"

"You'll see," he teased.

What did I say about my mood? "What?" I demanded.

"Wait until we get there," he told me.

"Where?"

"To the surprise."

I hate surprises, they usually end up with somebody dead. "When?"

He smiled indulgently. "We can go as soon as you stop asking questions."

When I just looked at him, he started walking toward the stairs. I followed silently as he led the way out of the chantry and to my car.

"Mickey will be staying closer to the chantry on his patrols," he told me when we were on our way. "We are expected to take on the extra duty. Since one of the house ghouls had been feeding Kate extra blood, and with the recent Sabbath attacks, Lord Radek feels it would be best to keep him closer to the power base."

At least we knew how Kate had been staying so perky. "Probably a good idea. Whose ghouls was it?" I couldn't remember what Elvira had said, I'd been too focused on killing Kate.

"Deenah," he replied softly

I'd met the Tremere, but hadn't really had much to do with her. "I assume they took care of it?" What I was really asking was if they'd killed the ghouls. You can't be a bad puppy in a Tremere chantry and not expect it to catch up to you.

"Yes."

"So we get extra duty," I murmured. "Does that mean we get to dust the Brujah?"

"Maybe." He glanced over in time to see me smile. "We'll just have to wait and see."

"Okay." I could deal with that. "So what's the surprise?"

"Wait and see," he said cryptically.

"May I remind you that I normally don't have much patience and it's worse tonight than usual?" His laughter grated on my nerves and I added, "I'm serious, I hate that testing."

"There isn't enough room to throw a stake in here luv," he reminded me, his voice soft and teasing.

"I wouldn't have to throw it," I shot back irritably.

"But you would make me wreck your new car," he replied, "and that would be a shame."

His strange mood was beginning to rub off on me. "It would be, I like this car," I admitted, finally starting to relax. "Not to mention it would ruin your suit." I reached over to take his hand and he smiled at me.

"I do hate that testing," I told him honestly. "You'd think it would be enough for me to kick some ass."

"They want to know your boundaries," he reminded me. "All of them, patience included."

"They're getting close to finding that one," I muttered. When he laughed, I added, "Yeah, you'll laugh when my temper breaks."

He got real serious real quick. "It will not break, understand? I managed to get Ford to overlook you throwing his ghoul into a wall."

I shot him an irritated look. How did he expect me to play the perfect puppy if everyone in the chantry was determined to set me off? "I understand that sometimes I can't hold my temper, Mac," I told him seriously, "but I'll do my best."

He squeezed my hand gently. "Thank you, luv."

I smiled and looked back out the window. "So, where we goin'?"

"Here," he replied as he pulled into a driveway.

It was a decent sized two-story house that looked like the front door and some of the trim had been replaced recently.

"Where is here?" I couldn't figure out what why we were stopping there, all the lights were out and there was no sign of life.

"Home," he said simply.

I looked at him in surprise. "What are you talking about?"

He explained that the Sabbath had taken over this house and killed most of the family who had lived here. The clan had bought the house to help protect the Masquerade, and they needed someone to live in it until it became marketable again.

It was hard for me to believe that the clan would just hand over a house like this, especially to us. "This is ours?"

"For the time being, yes," he assured me. "The inside needs the most work from what I understand. We can move as soon as it's livable and we're ready to."

I knew there was a catch. Given the violence of the Sabbath it would probably take months to make it livable. "How bad is it?"

"My understanding is the Rec. Room in the basement is the worst," he said thoughtfully. "I haven't been in it yet."

I'd always dreamed of having us having a house to ourselves and this just seemed too good to be true. Maybe they just wanted us to fix it up so they could give it to someone else. I shook off those thoughts and tried to think positively.

"Can we go in?" I asked softly.

He held up a set of keys and jingled them. We grinned at each other and got out to tour our new home.

The house was wonderful. It had three bedrooms upstairs and lots of room on the main floor. The Sabbath had trashed it, but someone had made the effort to clean things up. All the furniture and personal belongings had been cleared from the house, but it still smelled like old blood, especially the basement. It even had a garage.

"We'll have to do some painting," I told him when got to the basement. There were two targets spray painted on the walls and it looked like someone had shot at one of them and thrown knives at the other one.

"And airing out," he said. The smell of blood was much stronger down here. "Maybe replace some carpet."

"And some walls." It would take quite a bit of patching to fix what the Sabbath had done to the place but it wasn't as bad as I'd thought it would be.

When we got back to the foyer, he stopped and looked down at me. "Okay?"

I glanced around at the place, trying to hide my excitement. "It's certainly better than my apartment," I admitted teasingly, making him laugh. "What do we have to do before we move in? How long?"

"Make it livable by the rules of my... special needs," he told me. "As soon as possible."

That sounded good to me. "When do we get started?"

"Well, I suppose you could start tomorrow during the day if you wanted to."

"Did you have something planned for tonight?"

"We have patrol still to do," he reminded me.

I tried not to be disappointed. "But I can start tomorrow? Can we afford to do anything?"

Without a word he handed me a set of keys and a credit card.

I laughed and hugged him. Even if it was too good to be true, at least we had it for now. "I can't believe we get a house."

"We could always give it back," he drawled teasingly. "I mean if you like living with Brenda that much."

"I think not," I said firmly, pulling back to give him a firm look. He laughed and twirled me around.

The future looked better than it had even a few weeks ago. Mac and I finally had the house we'd dreamed about when we'd lived in Baltimore, the two-car garage and the picket fence.

I knew I'd never have the life we'd originally planned for all those years ago, but I was more than grateful for what we did have. Mac and I had a beautiful daughter who was intelligent and strong and safe. We also had each other, and that was what mattered most.

Maybe it was time to buy a dog.