



# CHRISTINA: THE HUNT

*Cathy McQuillin* © 1999

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# PROLOGUE

He says all the right things at exactly the right time  
But he means nothing to you and you don't know why  
Everything You Want - Vertical Horizons

Tonight was the anniversary of Prince Felicia's rise to power. She was throwing her annual party at TBA's, the local Kindred hangout. The Gangrel clan was handling the security for the evening, and Donna, the eldest Gangrel in the city, had asked Luke to be there early and help.

As I stepped from the shower and dried myself, my mind was not on my friend Luke Thomas or on Donna or even on the party that evening. As it had more and more often in the last few months, my mind turned to Jason Kline.

I pulled my undergarments on and remembered dressing for a special dinner with Jason what seemed like a lifetime ago. I tried not to think about how right it had felt to be in his arms while we danced with San Francisco spread out before us like a magic carpet of lights.

I turned on the hair dryer and worked at drying my long, dark hair. Its heat reminded me of the morning sun on my face at the monastery in Italy, and of the charmed cape that allowed me to see the sunrise without injury. I struggled to forget how the mage that had come for Jason and the sight of him bound to the altar, screaming in agony as I was forced to leave him there to protect the crystal.

I blinked away the red film that obscured my vision and turned the dryer off. Tears hadn't changed anything two years ago; they sure wouldn't help me now.

I lifted my hair to pull it up into a twist, then abruptly let it fall free. Jason had liked my hair up, he'd said that he enjoyed taking it down for me, but Luke liked it loose and flowing past my shoulders.

A vision flashed in my mind of the way I had looked after my car accident in LA. My hair had fallen from its pins and the dress I'd worn had been torn and bloody. Lena Stockton and I had gone to the city to search for Talon Graves, Jason's 'employer,' hoping he could help us find Jason. Instead I had almost ended my existence in a horrible car accident and had been reunited with Luke, an old and trusted friend.

Luke and I had acted like lovers while we searched for Jason and Graves, but in fact it hadn't been until some months after Luke returned to Vegas with me that we had become lovers in truth. How do you live with a man who adores you and not have sex with him? Or, more accurately, how do you live with a man to whom you are two thirds blood bonded to and not have sex with him? Answer: I didn't.

It didn't help for me to remember that Luke was fully bound to me. The first time he had fed from me, he'd had no choice. He'd been injured and the only way I felt I could save him was to force-feed him my vitae. It had worked and he had healed. Then, months later, the first time we had made love he had sunk his fangs into my throat. It had been so erotic that I hadn't even thought to struggle.

We had argued afterward, but Luke hadn't seen a problem with feeding from me; he already loved me, a full blood bond wouldn't make him care for me any more. How could I argue with that? A few weeks later he had again fed during sex, bringing the blood bond to full strength. I had cried afterward, nearly overwhelmed with the desire to return the 'kiss' and complete the bond that he had over me. I had barely resisted the temptation. If he had asked me to drink from him, I would have, but Luke never brought the subject up.

Over the next year, Luke had feed from me often, usually during sex. I had buried the shame I felt at making love with Luke so deeply that it only surfaced when I thought of Jason. The problem was that I thought of him more and more as the months went on.

I applied makeup sparingly to the lids of my green eyes and my cheekbones. The mirror told me that I looked young and very much alive, unchanged by the mortal death that would never touch me.

I swayed on my feet as my thoughts evoked the agony I'd felt when I was told that Jason was dead. Luke had seen me through those weeks, and we had grown quite close while our cover story threw off any suspicions there may have been about our search through Europe.

I also remembered the anger I felt when I'd realized that Jason was alive and hadn't bothered to contact me. Several weeks after I'd been told of his death he'd asked Graves to bring me a box in Nashville, but even when I finally had talked to Jason, he refused to see me.

Pushing the memories aside I looked in my jewelry box for my favorite earrings. I was more than a little concerned when I could only find one of them; they had been a gift from Antonio. I chose another pair and fastened a silver chain around my neck. The necklace reminded me of the long gold chain that held the cross Jason had sent to me in Nashville. His gift of the cross had revealed to me that he had been embraced and no longer needed his domitor's vitae.

I remembered how the blood remaining in the cross had helped me to revive Luke when he'd been injured during a fierce gunfight in Nashville. I had been terrified that he would die and that I would lose him as surely as I'd lost Jason. Graves' powerful vitae had given me the strength to force-feed Luke blood from my own body.

I stepped into the formal black sequined gown I'd chosen for this evening's party. I slid the thin straps up my arms and reached back to zip it up. I turned back to the nightstand and opened the drawer. Underneath a thick novel was a small black bag.

I opened the bag's drawstrings and dumped its contents into my hand. For a moment I did what I hadn't allowed myself to do in months: I looked at the ring, really looked at it.

I referred to it as a ring, but it was really a beautiful wedding set of two rings intertwined in such a way that they appeared to be one. The leafed design of the bands locked together beautifully, and the large diamond solitaire of the engagement ring sat like a glittering crown on top.

I turned the ring in my hand and remembered its mate, the man's wedding band that Jason had worn. I flinched at the image of Jason's smiling face when I had slipped the ring on his finger. I blinked in an effort to drive the memory away.

I slid the ring on my left ring finger and remembered when Jason had given it to me. We had been happy and laughing while we planned our trip to Europe, and for a moment I could almost believe that he'd never been abducted from the monastery, that he'd never walked away from me in San Francisco.

Ruthlessly I ripped the ring from my finger. Jason *had* been taken, and Luke, Lena and I had spent a month of grueling fear, anger and uncertainty before Jason had approached me on the streets of San Francisco.

He'd proceeded to tell me that things were different, that I couldn't see his face, couldn't be alone with him. No amount of my heartfelt words or Lena's pleadings had changed his mind. Luke's anger at Jason's treatment of me had only served to drive Jason further away.

Even when I tossed him the wedding band and begged him to wear it, I could sense no emotion in him. In desperation I'd told him that I loved him, the first time I had ever done so. Jason had coldly told me that I'd get over it and proceeded to walk out of my life.

Luke had returned to Vegas with me and agreed to stay for as long as I needed him. Although I had told myself in the beginning that I was giving my relationship with Luke every opportunity to blossom, by now I doubted my feelings would ever hold a candle to the bright sun of Luke's love for me, or the strength of my love for Jason.

I put the ring back in the small bag and told myself, as I did every night, that this would be the night that I would leave it in the drawer. I resolved, as I did every night, to put Jason's memory behind me and stop loving him.

I tried to make myself put the ring back in the drawer, I really did. Instead I found myself pinning the bag low enough inside my bodice that it couldn't be seen between my breasts. I often wore the ring pinned there; other times I strung it on a long chain and hid it beneath my blouse. Each morning I put the ring away so Luke didn't find it when we slept, but each night I found myself taking it out and carrying it with me like a talisman.

I sighed and picked up my evening bag. Because tonight's party was an Elysium function, no weapons were allowed save those carried by security. I felt naked and vulnerable without my Glocks, but I knew that Luke would be armed and that he would protect me with his life if need be.

I went downstairs to join him, a little amused at his discomfort in the tuxedo he was wearing. His brown eyes took in every inch of my appearance and made me feel beautiful without saying a word. He looked very dashing, with his long blond hair loose about his shoulders and the tuxedo emphasizing his strong build. I was struck with the longing to avoid the prince's party. I almost told him that I wanted to stay home, but I knew I couldn't interfere with his duties.

He pulled me against him for a passionate kiss, his teeth scraping against my tongue just hard enough to bring blood. I laughed deep in my throat and allowed him to drink briefly before pulling back.

"Unless you want to stay home this evening...." I said quietly.

He smiled. "I'll behave. I know they need me." After one last kiss where he ran his tongue along the wounds in my mouth to close them, he took my hand and we left for TBA's.

# A RING

But I can't forget the words you said to move on with my life  
And no matter what I'll carry you inside  
Yesterday's Letter - 98°

Luke and I sat at a corner of the bar sipping our drinks and talking to friends. The party was in full swing and on any normal evening we would have been out on the dance floor. Tonight Luke's security duties required that he stay at the bar and watch the front entrance for any sign of intruders.

Rumor had it that a few Kindred had recently returned to Las Vegas and wanted to take control. They had fought for domination of the city in the forties, but they'd been driven out. I suppose they were slow learners.

Many of the women present watched Luke as if he were a piece of candy, but I was the only one he looked at with more than a passing interest. He was tall and handsome, and his long hair surrounded his head like a halo. Luke had been wearing sunglasses most of the time since he'd frenzied in Nashville when he thought I'd been killed, but tonight he wasn't wearing them. Frenzy in a Gangrel leaves behind a mark of the beast, and now as a consequence of his loss of control Luke's eyes were like those of a cat with slitted pupils that caught the light.

Despite his duty, Luke and I touched frequently. Sometimes it was as little as the brushing of fingertips across an arm, at other times he would put his arm around me and I would lean into his strength. The evening became an anticipation of our return to the solitude of our apartment.

Around ten thirty, I felt Luke stiffen beside me and turn toward the door. In a single fluid motion, he had drawn both of his guns and handed me one of them. He shoved me down to the floor and, using the bar as a shield, fired toward the door.

Gunfire echoed throughout the room and several small fires broke out from the explosions of phosphorous rounds. Carefully I raised up enough to get a clear shot and fired at the interlopers. I hit one, but he didn't go down. I lost count of the number of times the Gangrel in the room and I fired as the six Kindred near the door fell one by one.

When they were all down and our guns had fallen silent, I heard gunshots from behind me. I turned to look and felt a great pain in the center of my chest. I staggered back against Luke, then fell to the ground. Distantly I heard the roar of Luke's fury as I quickly used some of the blood inside of me to heal myself.

I clutched the neckline of my dress together and realized that the ring Jason had given me was gone. I glanced toward the other end of the bar where Luke stood over a body, blood dripping from inch-long talons on his hands.

Frantically I looked around the floor for the bag or the ring. I finally spotted them under a table a few feet away. The bag was in shreds, but the ring looked intact.

I blinked the tears from my eyes and crawled over to the ring. I picked it up and saw that it had barely been scratched by the blast. I removed the chain I wore and strung the ring on it. With shaking hands I replaced the chain around my neck and tucked the ring under the hair at the back of my neck to make sure it stayed out of sight.

I looked up to see Luke watching me, his face completely emotionless. I had no idea if he'd realized that I still kept Jason's ring with me before that moment, but now he knew I did. I sat down on the floor and looked away, unable to meet his gaze. I knew that what I felt for Jason betrayed the relationship Luke and I shared even as our relationship betrayed what I felt for Jason.

I jumped a little when Luke crouched before me and placed his jacket around my shoulders. He helped me to my feet and pulled me into his arms. I laid my head on his shoulder and let my blood tears fall unchecked onto his shirtfront.

After a long while Luke guided my arms into the jacket sleeves and pulled it closed to cover my ruined bodice. He draped an arm around my shoulder and led me out to the car. In silence, we returned to the apartment.

# THE CALL

Without the night this would be so much easier  
Without the night reminding me I'm alone  
Without The Night - Winger

I didn't see Luke during the next few weeks. The only reason I knew he was coming back to the apartment was that I would hear him come inside every morning just before sleep overtook me and listen to the door close behind him as he left every night. It was like living with the ghost of a memory.

At first I stayed in the apartment and hoped that he would come back to me, wrap me in his arms and make the pain disappear again. One night it finally occurred to me that Luke had never really made the pain go away, his touch only put off the inevitable experience of that pain.

For the first time the paintings high on the walls of the apartment failed to hold my attention. The pinks and purples of the sunrises paled beside my memory of the sun rising behind the Italian Mountains. In disgust, I pulled them off the wall and gave them away, leaving the walls of my apartment as bare and as empty as I felt.

The plants that filled the room seemed pale and lifeless compared to the forests of Italy, or the parks of Nashville and Paris. The plush furniture looked inviting for two, but too large and lonely for one. I couldn't look at the dining room table without remembering meals I had cooked for Jason, or seeing Luke reassemble the carburetor for his motorcycle.

I longed for someone I could talk to about the situation I found myself in, but when I'd lost Jason, I'd lost everything that had meant anything to me. In time Luke had become the only person I would let close to me, although I still talked to Lena now and then. Perhaps I was ashamed of my weakness for needing Luke, or maybe it was guilt that I had allowed myself to become partially blood bonded to him. Whatever the reason, I felt isolated and alone, unwilling or unable to go to even my family for aid.

I began spending all of my nights at the Tremere Chantry, turning to the only things I knew would never desert me; magic and the clan. A part of me knew that it was only another delaying tactic, that at some point I would have to face the fact that I still loved Jason, but I didn't care. I simply couldn't bear my empty apartment anymore, and soon I was leaving only minutes after Luke. Some mornings I cursed myself for not watching the time when I hurried inside, but I never saw him, not even if the sky was pink with the coming sunrise when I got home.

One night I was at the chantry studying when my cell phone rang. It startled me; when I had stopped returning my friend's calls, they had stopped calling. For a moment I thought it might be Luke, but then I remembered that I was still wearing the communication device we had picked up in LA so long ago. If Luke were going to contact me, I knew he'd use that.

I answered the phone. "Hello?"

"Christina."

I knew that voice. "Idella, what can I do for you?" Idella was the Tremere Primogen of Las Vegas. She and Antonio were very good friends and she had taken over my training while he was staying in LA.

"Have you heard anything about what's going on in town?" she asked me. I could hear faint music in the background and wondered where she was.

"Not really," I admitted, "I've been a little wrapped up in my studies for the last few weeks." Ever since Luke started avoiding me.

"There has been a murder tonight, Christina," she told me.

"A murder?" I knew it would have to involve the city's preternatural element if Idella was interested in it.

"Actually two, at one of the Starbuck's in town," she explained. "There were only body parts found. We need to find out who did this. I'd like you to come down to TBA and help us investigate this matter."

"Should I come prepared?" I was asking if I needed to come armed and she knew it.

"Yes."

"I'll be there as soon as I can, Idella."

"I'll be waiting."

I waited for her hang up before I did the same; it wouldn't do for me to insult the clan Primogen. I cleaned up my lab area and left the office building the chantry was in. The only other person there was one of the guards and I nodded at him on my way out. I got into my yellow 1967 Mustang and put the top down. I wanted the wind in my hair to clear my head; I knew I'd need it by the time the night was over.

I went back to my apartment and immediately went upstairs to the sleeping loft. I took the Glock 22 I carried out of its holster in the small of my back and tossed it on the bed. While the gun wasn't the original weapon Jason had given me nearly three years ago, it was identical to it. I strode quickly to the closet and pulled out several items at random and threw them on the bed beside the gun.

I stripped of the slacks and blouse I had worn to the chantry and began to dress. The red tank top was thin and not quite opaque, the black jeans formfitting but not enough to restrict my movements. I pulled a pair of black leather boots from the closet and put them on.

My Glock 17 slipped easily into the holster in the right boot that I'd had made for it. I clipped the holster for the larger Glock into the back of my waistband and put the gun into it. I liked the feel of it at my back; the gun was like an old friend who was always willing to help me out when I needed it.

From the top drawer of the dresser I took out a wrist sheath and knife I'd bought up only a few weeks ago. I'd never worn it before and now seemed like a good time to try it out. The knife had a high silver content and I felt safer wearing it because from the description of the bodies that Idella had given me, I suspected werewolves. I strapped the sheath to my right forearm and picked up the last article of clothing from the bed. The black leather jacket was a little too big for me, but I liked it that way.

I had picked up the jacket in Moscow while looking for Jason. It was similar in style to the one that Luke wore, and he had helped me pick it out. I wished that Luke was with me to back me up tonight, but even if he were still talking to me, I knew that Idella would not approve of his presence.

The red and black of my clothing accented the paleness of my skin. The dark fabrics would allow me to hide easily in the shadows. My hair was long and loose, curling past my shoulders. There was no visible sign of my weapons.

At first glance I didn't look Tremere. Kindred of my clan usually dress conservatively, although not usually as conservatively as the Ventrue. No, at first glance I seemed Brujah or Gangrel. Between my clothes and the crowd I normally ran with, many newcomers to Vegas had mistaken me for Gangrel.



I checked the draw of the knife and adjusted the sleeve a little before trying it again. The second try was much better. I grabbed extra clips for both my guns and shoved them in my jacket pockets.

I walked to the trunk that stood before the chaise lounge in my bedroom. I crouched beside it and ran my hand across its polished wood surface. For a moment I rested my cheek against the wood with my eyes closed.

Everything I had that reminded me of Jason was in that trunk save the ring tucked between my breasts. The single picture I had of him was in there, to my knowledge the only photograph ever taken of him without one of his various disguises. I could see it in my mind without opening the lid: his blond hair fell across his forehead, his hazel eyes shone with affection as he looked at the camera, his jaw strong and masculine, the smile that had always driven me to distraction.

Regardless of what he had looked like, his appearance had never been what had drawn me to him. Call it charisma, call it karma, call it fate if you must, but something deep within me had recognized something deep within Jason the moment our eyes had met across the smoky hotel room he'd saved me from. I had fought the attraction for as long as I could, but once I realized that I could trust him, my guard and my heart had both fallen for him.

I opened the lid of the trunk, trying to break the flow of memories. Jason was gone and Luke was gone and now I had to pick up my life and move on. I had to follow the advice of Jason's last words to me and get over it.

On top of the items inside was an ornately carved box. I picked it up and carefully lifted the lid. Jason's cross necklace gleamed softly in the lamp light. The surface of the large cross was Celtic in design, but it had a hidden clasp on one side that revealed a secret compartment. I tripped the catch and looked at the beautiful engravings that covered the interior surface. The vines and flowers matched those on the ring Jason had given me.

Fifteen small beads lay within; three each on the top and horizontal bars of the cross, five on the bottom, and one in the center. All of the beads shimmered with a hypnotizing crimson swirl. The cross had helped me save Luke's life when he was injured in Nashville. Graves' blood had been within the beads then, and its power had given me the strength to heal Luke. Since then I had refilled the beads with my own blood.

I put on the necklace and let it fall between my breasts with the other chain I wore. The cross hit the ring and the two tangled as if they were lovers greeting each other after a long absence; since I'd gotten them both from Jason, perhaps they were.

I glanced at the clock and knew I didn't have time to move the ring to its bag between my breasts. Carefully I untangled the chains and tucked the ring under my shirt hoping that it would stay there.

I hurried out of the apartment and drove quickly to TBA.

# ASSIGNMENT

Superman where are you now?

Everything's gone wrong somehow

Land of Confusion - Genesis

The music nearly overwhelmed me when I opened the door of TBA and walked inside. I took a look around, but didn't see Idella anywhere. One of the city's Brujah was near the bar with her ghouls and I nodded to them but they didn't see me. I thought Idella would probably want more privacy than the main room would offer, so I walked to the door of the back room.

I entered quietly and the level of noise dropped drastically once the door was closed. The room was nearly empty with only one bartender and waitress attending the four Kindred at the corner table. The television above the bar was on and I could hear the low drone of a late movie. Idella and Eleni, another Tremere who lived here in Las Vegas, were sitting with two Kindred that I assumed were also Tremere.

The girl was of Spanish decent and tall with dark hair and eyes. The man was also tall, with short brown hair that looked like he'd just run a hand through it. He had high cheekbones and piercing eyes. The dignity with which he carried himself almost reminded me of Jason.

Idella saw me and gave me a disapproving look. I figured she didn't like my choice of clothes but I wasn't about to argue the point with her; I knew what worked best for me in a fight and I didn't really think we'd be going back to the Tremere Chantry.

I walked over and bowed slightly to my Primogen. "Idella." I turned and nodded to Eleni.

"Christina," Idella said smoothly. I had never seen her ruffled, and I wasn't sure I wanted to. The woman had more power than any other Tremere in town. "Why don't you pull up a chair?"

I turned and grabbed a chair from a nearby table and pulled it between Idella and Eleni. There wasn't a lot of room there, but I wasn't going to sit next to someone I didn't know. The search for Jason had taught me to be wary, maybe even paranoid, but it had kept me alive.

I noticed that the girl looked a bit worried when I sat down and I wondered about her reaction until Idella gestured toward my cross. I tucked it into the tank top and the girl seemed relieved.

"Christina, I'd like you to meet our guests," Idella told me as she gestured toward the others. "This is Nina Rodriguez and Cormac. They have come to us from Los Angeles at Antonio's request."

I looked down at my lap for a moment; I hadn't spoken to Antonio since the night I'd met up with Brenda Thompson in Nashville. She had contacted our sire using a mental link and he had chastised me for not letting Brenda help me find Jason. He had told me that he thought I was too close to the situation to be effective; he'd been quite right.

"Nina, Cormac," Idella continued, "this is Christina Strong, Antonio's childe."

I looked up, glancing at both of their faces. "Do you know Antonio well?" I asked them.

"Not really," Cormac replied. He seemed like a man who kept his own counsel, but when he spoke he meant what he said.

"We are friends," Nina told me. She had a kind face, but I could see a spine of steel beneath her pretty demeanor.

I took a slow breath to control my chaotic thoughts. "How is he?"

Nina shot me a questioning look and I knew she was wondering why I didn't know how my own sire was. I didn't offer to explain because I wasn't sure I could.

"He is fine," she replied. "You should get a hold of him, I know he'd like to talk to you."

It was my turn to shoot her a questioning look but at the accusation in her eyes I looked away. "Yeah, I'll have to do that," I said in a low voice. I wasn't sure I could talk to Antonio, but perhaps it was time for me to try.

"He talks of you often," Nina said. "He misses you."

My eyes shot to her face. "He said that?" I knew I wasn't doing a good job of hiding my feelings, but she had surprised me.

She smiled gently. "Not in so many words, but I know he does."

I looked at her and finally admitted to myself that I missed Antonio too. He was the closest thing to a father that I could remember, closer even than my real father was. I wondered why I had let that slip away. I wondered if I could salvage the relationship or if he would be someone else I had lost.

"Back to why we are here," Idella interrupted patiently. "We need to go down to Starbucks and take a look at the crime scene. The police and the coroner should be cleared out of there by now."

"Do you want to ride together or take separate cars?" I asked.

"You drove?" she asked.

"Yeah."

"I'll ride with Christina," she told the others. "You can take the Cadillac and we'll meet you there."

We rose and went outside to the vehicles. I had been following the Cadillac for several minutes when Idella finally spoke.

"I talk to Antonio at least once a week," she said, raising her voice to be heard above the wind whipping past us, "each time he asks about you, how you are doing."

I nodded; she had mentioned this before.

"Often you ask me about Antonio. He told me what happened with the mortal and Luke Thomas. Why haven't you contacted him?"

I glanced at her face and only saw concern. "I'm afraid that he is disappointed in me," I admitted softly, tears filling my eyes. I had failed at so much when I was trying to find Jason, and been partially blood bonded to someone outside of our clan. For that alone I knew Antonio would be pissed if he ever found out.

"He is like a father to you, Christina," she said not unkindly as she handed me a handkerchief to wipe my tears. "He wants only the best for you—"

"He needs to let me make my own mistakes," I said, biting back on my anger while dabbing at the blood in my eyes.

"If you hadn't interrupted me, you would have heard me say that," she replied sternly. I nodded without meeting her gaze. "Sometimes it is difficult for a parent or a sire let their child learn from their own mistakes, but he knows that you are no longer a child."

I couldn't answer her; I didn't know what to say.

"The clan makes us strong, Christina," Idella reminded me. "He is your sire, your direct link to the clan. How can you be strong if you break the chain that holds us all together?"

I looked at her for a long moment, trying to read behind her words. Was she only concerned for the clan or did she really care about Antonio and me? It didn't really matter; the reminder of my clan obligations was enough to convince me that I had to talk to Antonio and apologize for my behavior.

We were approaching the murder scene and I dragged my eyes back to the road. I pulled into the parking lot of Starbucks right behind the Cadillac and stopped beside it. I noticed a large truck parked at the curb as Idella and I got out and joined the others.

A tall man climbed down from the truck and walked over to our group. I recognized him as Brad, from the Brujah clan. He gave us information on the victims from a notebook he pulled out of his pocket. My stomach turned when he said that a seemingly random body part was missing from each of the fatalities.

"Are there any personal belongings from the bodies?" Cormac asked.

"The police took everything," Brad replied.

"These bodies were ripped apart as well?" Idella inquired.

Brad nodded. "Completely. Looks as if the girl's ear is missing, and the guy's little finger from his left hand."

I blinked to clear the vision of Jason's severed hand from my mind. "Do you think it was werewolves?" I asked.

"I don't think so," he told me. "There was a lot of blood missing."

"Kindred," I mused. Only a vampire would drain the blood from a victim. This was not good.

Just then a long black limousine pulled into the parking lot. We watched the driver get out and walk around to open the door for his passenger. He looked more like a bodyguard than a chauffeur.

"Cormac," I whispered softly, "why did you ask about personal belongings?"

"Auspex," he replied quietly. Higher levels of Auspex, one of our clan's abilities, allowed a Kindred to see visions from objects, much like Lena's natural gift.

The man who got out of the back of the limousine could have been straight from 'The Godfather'. He was tall and dark and angry. I could tell by the auras that both men were very suspicious of us.

Idella motioned for us to stay put and walked toward them. She came to a stop well out of their reach. Her aura told me that she felt sorry for them, but I didn't understand why.

I heightened my hearing so that I could listen to their conversation.

"Cross," Idella said respectfully.

"Idella," the passenger replied coolly. "How is the investigation going?"

"We are looking into every possibility," she replied.

"I would think with your... abilities, you would have found the killer by now, Idella," Cross told her. "Felicia promised me this would be taken care of quickly."

"Jesus," I whispered angrily to myself, "what happened to the freaking Masquerade?" Kindred were supposed to remain hidden from mortals, but Cross talked as if he knew all about the Kindred in Vegas.

Idella shot a look over her shoulder that told me she had heard me. I raised an eyebrow and continued to watch them.

"We will find the person who did this, Cross," Idella said firmly. Even across the distance between us, I could tell she was trying to bend his mind so that he would believe her. It didn't work.

Cross' aura changed abruptly to show bitterness and hate. I worried that Idella was too far away from us, too close to men who knew what she was, what we all were. Once a human believes vampires exist, it's a small step to finding out how to kill one.

"I am beginning to doubt your ability to do that," Cross replied. "I lost three of my family members in the last week and I want to know who to blame."

I reached behind my back and undid the snap that held my gun in its holster. I let my fist rest on my right hip, holding my jacket back and close to the gun, ready to draw if either man made any threatening movements toward Idella. From the corner of my eye, I noticed that Cormac slid his hand inside his jacket for a moment, then placed his hand on his belt buckle.

Our actions did not go unseen; the bodyguard also shifted to gain a quicker draw of his gun. Idella saw it, and turned to look back at our group. She turned her right palm toward us indicating that she didn't want trouble here.

I put my hand down and pulled my jacket closed. I did not refasten the snap over the gun, but I did relax my stance. Beside me, Cormac did the same.

"If anyone can find out what happened," Idella said as she took a step closer to the two men before her, "it will be our people. I give you my word, Crucificio, that this tragedy will be avenged."

Cross looked at her for a long moment, then nodded. His bodyguard seemed to relax a bit, and stepped toward the car.

"I look forward to hearing from you soon, Idella," Cross told her.

"Soon," she promised.

The bodyguard opened the door for Cross and Brad breathed a sigh of relief as it pulled away. Idella walked back to our group with anger in her aura.

"Do you have any idea who that was?" she demanded in a tightly controlled voice.

"No," I told her calmly, although her obvious anger made me a little nervous.

"That was Crucificio Cortalone," she told me.

She seemed to be waiting for a reaction, but I hadn't recognized the name. "Who?"

My lack of knowledge took Idella back for a moment. "You really don't know who he was?" I shook my head.

"Cross is the head of the Cortalone family, one of the two most powerful Mafia families in Vegas. His nephew was one of the boys killed at The Dive."

Understanding finally dawned; I had heard that there were several Mafia families that practically ran Vegas, but I'd never paid attention to their names. That Cross was the head of one of them told me that he was ruthless, relentless, and completely without mercy.

"I see," I said softly.

Idella took a deep breath to calm herself. "We have agreements with both the Cortalone and the Luciano families; we don't fuck with them and they don't fuck with us. See that you don't forget and make the mistake of readying your weapon in his presence again, Christina."

I nodded. It didn't bother me that I was the only one Idella was chastising, I should have known who the men were, I lived in Las Vegas. Cormac was new in town and now he knew, that was enough.

Idella turned toward Brad. "Did you get blood samples?" she asked him.

"Yeah, they're in the truck," he told her.

"Eleni and I will return to the chantry to check out the samples," Idella said. "I want the three of you to go to the morgue and see what you can find out from the bodies."

"Yes, ma'am," Cormac said respectfully. Nina and I echoed him.

"Check in with me if you find anything," she added. "Christina, you have my number?"

"Yes, ma'am," I replied.

Idella took out two business cards and handed them to Nina and Cormac. "In case you get separated," she told them. Her cards were very plain, bearing only her first name and a phone number. If she had a last name, I'd never heard it. Idella and Eleni left shortly thereafter, following the large truck toward downtown Las Vegas and the chantry.

# KINDRED IN WOLF'S CLOTHING

Backstreet fover on the side of the road  
Got a bomb in my temple that is gonna explode  
Once - Pearl Jam

The three of us got into my Mustang and pulled out of the parking lot and headed for the morgue. Before I had even gone a block, I heard Nina gasp.

"What?" I asked. She pointed at an alley across the street.

A large wolf stood at the mouth of the alley. I looked at his aura and was surprised to realize that it was Kindred. The wolf seemed obsessed about something almost to the point of frenzy. It watched Cormac as we drove past.

"Made any new friends lately?" I asked him.

"I want to go back and get a better look," Cormac said.

I met his eye in the rear view mirror. "You want to go back?"

"Yes."

"Have you ever been around a Kindred in frenzy, or frenzied yourself?" I asked him as I pulled to the side of the road. I had frenzied twice in my life and seen Luke frenzy when we were searching for Jason. It was not a pretty sight by any means.

"No," he replied slowly, "but my sire explained the process to me."

"So you've never been around a frenzy?"

"No."

"And you still want to go back."

"Yes."

I sighed and reached behind my back for my Glock. I set it on the seat beside me and saw that Cormac had pulled a large shotgun out from under his long coat. I looked at Nina.

"Do you have a weapon?" Cormac asked before I could.

Nina took out a pair of nunchucka.

"You don't have a gun." I stated.

"No," she replied.

I bent down, took the smaller Glock from my boot and held it out to her. She didn't take it.

"I don't believe in guns," she said.

I raised an eyebrow at her in disbelief. "You don't believe in guns?"

She shook her head and looked at me stubbornly. "My sire taught me to use other means of defense."

I held up the gun between us. "It's right here, believe it, Nina. You may not believe in using a gun, but you'd better believe they exist."

I put the gun back in my boot and turned the car around.

"We're just investigating, Christina," Cormac reminded me. "I don't want to kill anyone."

"You investigate, I'll survive," I told him bluntly as I parked the car about twenty feet from the alley. I left the engine running and glanced at Nina while I picked up my gun from the seat. "Perhaps you'd better stay in the car, just in case. The wolf may still *believe* he's in frenzy."

I winced a little at my cutting words, but it was too late, the words had been said. I wanted to apologize, but somehow I couldn't. I got out of the car and watched Cormac jump

out of the back seat. His right foot landed softly on the trunk of the Mustang, but he wiped the mark off gently before I could say anything.

Since he was so anxious to see the frenzied Kindred, I let Cormac lead the way toward the alley. I stayed about five feet back and kept an eye on the surrounding area. I saw nothing, but extended inch long claws on my left hand just in case the Kindred was good at hiding. I kept the hand close to my thigh; no one but Luke knew that he had been teaching me a few of his clan's tricks.

I knew now that two years ago I had been unprepared for the harsh realities of life, and I didn't want to spend eternity at the mercy of others. If Jason could see me now, he'd find a much different woman than the one he had left on the streets of San Francisco.

Nina climbed into the driver's seat of the Mustang and, staying behind me, approached the alley. Cormac swung out a bit from the mouth of the alley and looked down into its darkness. From the disappointment on his face, I knew he saw nothing; the Kindred was long gone.

Cormac turned to look at me, then past me. Suddenly he was running toward me, looking over my shoulder. I spun and caught a glimpse of a tall Kindred on the next block, his aura the same as that of the wolf we had seen earlier. He turned the corner and disappeared.

I started running and caught up with Cormac easily. "Did I miss something?"

"He's Gangrel," he told me.

"I figured that," I replied coolly. Not many clans had the inherent ability to change into wolf form, but the Gangrel were the most likely to have it in Las Vegas. Of course, the ability can be learned, just like I had learned the claws from Luke.

"He had frenzy marks," Cormac added as we ran. "Pointed ears, and cat's eyes."

In a flash I was ahead of Cormac and touching the device behind my ear. It had initially been set to listen, but my touch changed it to broadcast as well.

"Luke," I said urgently.

After a moments delay he responded, but he sounded strange. "Yeah."

I hadn't really expected him to answer me and the fact that he had threw me for a minute. "Luke?" I repeated.

"Yeah, I'm here." His voice was slurred as if he had fed from someone who had been drinking.

"Where are you?"

"Why?"

I could hear the anger in his voice, but I didn't have the time or the patience for it. "I'm following a Gangrel with cat's eyes and I need to know if its you."

"I'm at Everlasting Moments, babe," he told me.

I winced at the way he said 'babe'; what used to be an endearment now sounded more like a curse.

"Are you off chasing noble causes again?" He sounded drunk.

When I turned the corner, the man was gone. I stopped and Cormac ran past me down the street.

"I've had it with noble causes Luke," I told him sadly as I holstered my gun. "Why would you think this was one?"

"You've always been a fool for noble causes, Christina," he answered desolately.



I leaned back against the brick wall of the building and didn't know what to say. Did he consider me saving his life a noble cause or was he talking about trying to find Jason? And his calling me by name was almost too much to bear; the only time Luke did that was when things were seriously wrong around us, or between us.

"Look," he said suddenly, "I'm losing the buzz and I'd like to get back to the party."

I opened my mouth and had to shut it again to stop myself from begging to come join him. I knew it wouldn't do either of us much good, not while I still loved Jason.

"Take care of yourself, Luke," I whispered, not sure if he would even hear me.

He did. "I always do," he told me. "Along with everyone else." The last was said so softly that I thought I'd misheard him. Before I could ask what he'd meant, I heard a soft click and he was gone.

I touched the device behind my ear to return it to listen. I didn't think Luke would try communicating with me again tonight, but I had to leave that door open. I knew it was the partial blood bond he had over me, but I didn't care; if he wanted to talk to me, I'd welcome it, even if it cut me to ribbons inside every time.

I felt tears prick at my eyes and pulled out the handkerchief Idella had given me. I covered my eyes with it and turned to lean my forehead against the building, struggling not to give into the tears. I placed my left hand on the brick near my head and realized that there were still claws on each of the fingers. I clenched my hand and felt the nails retract into my flesh and disappear.

I heard Cormac returning and saw my car pull up from the corner of my eye. I wiped at my tears, trying to keep my face turned away from both of them, but they were on opposite sides of me. I faced Nina as I wiped the last traces of blood from my face.

"We should continue to the morgue," Cormac said as he approached me.

"Yes," I said firmly. I gestured for Nina to move back to the passenger's seat but she hesitated.

"Are you sure you're all right to drive?" she asked. "You seem kind of emotional."

I closed my eyes briefly. "I am not emotional," I bit out through clenched teeth.

At the look on her face, I caught myself and smiled at her sadly. "I'm sorry," I told her. "I'm frustrated and there's no call for me to take it out on you. I'm fine, really."

She studied my face for a moment, then shrugged. "Okay," she said, and she moved over.

I opened the door and watched Cormac walk around to get in from Nina's side. I knew I had to start watching my temper or I was going to alienate everyone I met. I got in and drove the speed limit to the city morgue.

# CLUES

Give me a word, give me a sign  
Show me where to look tell me what I may find  
Shine - Collective Soul

I parked in front of the morgue and set the car alarm before we entered the building. As soon as Nina mentioned Idella's name to the attendant, he led us down the hall to one of the coolers.

Six gurneys covered with red stained sheets lined one wall. The shapes under the sheets seemed odd to me until I remembered that these bodies had been ripped apart. The smell of blood was nearly overwhelming in the small room. I hung back a bit while Cormac went to the closest gurney. The attendant left us alone as Cormac pulled back the sheet.

Suddenly I was glad that I hadn't fed that night. I turned away and gagged, knowing that if there had been anything in my stomach, I would have vomited. I took deep breaths through my mouth to try and control the nausea, and after a while I felt better. I knew I couldn't watch Cormac with the bodies, so I tried to think of something else I could do that would help.

I dialed Jessie Casteel's number. Jessie had lived in the city for several years and we had become good friends in the last few months. Since she was Gangrel, I thought she might be able to help me find the man we were looking for.

After a few rings she answered the phone, but she didn't have any information for me. Jessie studied nocturnal wild life in the desert around Las Vegas and she had been in the field for several weeks now. She did suggest I call Donna, and gave me her number.

I glanced at Cormac who was just finishing up with the last body. I was grateful that he had covered them back up as he had moved from one to the next.

Cormac walked back to where Nina and I stood and sighed deeply. "The murderer is a Gangrel with at least four frenzy marks," he told us. "He has pointed ears, whiskers, paws instead of hands, and animal eyes." He seemed shaken by what he had seen and leaned against a wall to gather himself.

I dialed Donna's number, hoping that she would remember me. She didn't, until I told her I was Luke's friend.

"Ah, the little Tremere." Her voice was condescending and it was an effort to keep my temper under control.

"I understand that your clan has been investigating the recent slew of murders," I said patiently. "We are also looking into that and have discovered that the murderer is probably a Gangrel with at least four frenzy marks."

"Is that so?" she asked sounding only mildly interested.

"Yes." I told her of the marks Cormac had seen and asked her if she knew any of her clan members with those marks. She didn't.

"If you come across any information regarding this person, could you give me a call?" I asked politely.

"I might," she replied. Now she sounded bored.

I closed my eyes briefly. "Please understand that I have Idella on me about this, Donna. It's important we find out who is doing this."

"That's what you get when you have a Primogen to answer to," she drawled.

I wanted to defend my clan, but I knew she wouldn't welcome the effort. "I would appreciate it if you would call me if you find out anything about the murderer," I told her coolly.

"Perhaps."

I knew that was the best I was going to get. "Thank you, Donna. Maybe I'll talk to you later."

"Anything is possible." With that, she hung up.

I didn't like the way the conversation had gone, but there was nothing I could do about it. I didn't know why Donna had been so hostile, but I thought that Luke might have something to do with her attitude. It wasn't that I thought he would try to turn others against me, I just knew how well the local Gangrel thought of him. Kindred clans are like family; if you hurt one member, they all hate you.

I turned to Nina. "Perhaps you could call Idella and let her know what we have found out," I suggested. I didn't want to talk to her again tonight, I was afraid she would tell me I needed to call Antonio and I didn't want to hear it. I was planning on contacting him as soon as I was alone.

Nina called Idella and filled her in on what Cormac had told us and as soon as she hung up we started for the car.

I wasn't sure where we were supposed to go next, but I wanted to take a look at the other crime sites. Before I could ask the others if they agreed, my phone rang. It was Idella.

"I've had a call from O'Shay's Liquor Store," she told me. "They were reporting a strange man hanging around the premises. I want you to go check it out."

"I'm not familiar with where that is," I replied.

"You've never been to O'Shay's?" Idella sounded surprised.

"No, I don't normally hang out at liquor stores," I said wryly.

"It's actually a front for a Ventrue chain," she informed me. "There's one in San Francisco, too. The Carnival."

"The Carnival in San Francisco?" I asked. I'd never heard of it before.

"The Carnival?" Nina repeated from beside me. "I've been there."

"Nina's been to the one in 'Frisco," I told Idella.

"Good," she replied, "then she'll know the code to get in. Just go to O'Shay's and let Nina do the talking."

"Okay." I got directions from Idella, then put away my phone. "What exactly is 'The Carnival'?" I asked Nina.

"It's a club for Kindred and humans, and there are games like a carnival," she told me. "And a Bridal Path."

I caught a glimpse of Cormac rubbing his temple and looking somewhat amused. "A Bridal Path as in a wedding, or as in a path through the woods?"

Nina seemed to find my question funny, then explained to us that the Bridal Path was one of the attractions at the adults only carnival we would find beneath O'Shay's. When we entered the carnival, I understood.

The underground room was quite large and although there were a great many people in it, the sound level was subdued. I was shocked to see a great number of naked and clothed humans among the crowd. The naked ones seemed to be servants of some sort, and I could see many booths with naked mortals on display or part of some sort of game.

Tori, the Ventrue hostess, greeted us and gave us a map of the room. I allowed Nina to do the talking, as I was very uncomfortable in our surroundings.

We had decided to take a look around for anyone out of place, when a tall blond mortal approached us. He was naked, but that wasn't what shocked me. He looked so much like Jason that I simply stared at him. I even turned to watch as he went to the bar for our drinks.

I was startled when Caroline, the proprietor and another member of the Ventrue clan, welcomed us to the club. I introduced the others to her and she asked if we'd ever been to the carnival before. Nina told her that she'd attended the one in San Francisco, but neither Cormac nor myself had ever been to anything like what we were in now. She offered to show us around.

As we walked toward the Bridal Path area, the nude servant brought our drinks. We accepted them from him, and he bowed graciously before leaving us. As he walked away I couldn't help but wonder just how closely this mortal resembled Jason.

After a few minutes of conversation, Cormac asked if Caroline had seen anyone suspicious about.

"Several of my employees saw a Kindred in the parking garage," she told us. "I called Idella to let her know, did she send you to check it out?"

When we replied that she had, Caroline led us to a large curtain marked "Employees Only." She led us through the back rooms and handed me a key card with instructions on how to use the touch pad by the door to get back in. She left us at the exit and wished us luck.

# THE GARAGE

Let's toast the hero with blood in his eyes  
The scars on his mind took so many lives  
Die Hard the Hunter - Def Leppard

We walked out into the basement level of a parking garage. As one we looked to the right when we heard a car door slam, but the sound had been distant and we couldn't see who had made the noise. We listened to receding footsteps as we peered into the semi-darkness.

Toward the street was an unlit section of the parking garage. I could barely make out the shapes of cars within the darkened area. I pulled my gun and held it against my leg as Cormac took out a cigarette and lit it. Together the three of us stepped toward the shadowed area.

The sound of my cell phone ringing cut through the parking garage like a knife. With my left hand, I reached inside my jacket and grabbed the phone.

"Hello?"

"Christina?"

"Brenda," I replied, surprised to hear her voice on the other end of the line; I hadn't spoken to more than her answering machine since the night she had left Las Vegas return to Salem, Massachusetts nearly two years ago. "Look, I'm a bit busy right now."

"Are you alright?" she asked.

"Yeah, why?" I tried to keep my voice low and motioned for the others to go on without me. Cormac took Nina's arm and led her toward the darkened side of the parking garage.

"Well, you used to return the messages I left on your machine, but you haven't called me back in months," she chided.

My machine, the one I hadn't checked since Luke started his disappearing act. "Sorry, I've been busy."

"With Luke?" Brenda's voice had taken on a definite chill.

"No."

"What?" she asked. "I can't really hear you, why are you talking so softly?"

"I'm trying to stay quiet so I don't spook the frenzied Kindred." I smiled grimly at the imagery.

"Excuse me? Where are you?"

"I'm in a parking garage looking for a frenzied Gangrel murderer. Idella asked me to look into it."

"Is Luke with you or is he the murderer?" Needless to say, she really didn't like Luke.

"Neither."

"You really need to lose that boy," Brenda told me sternly.

"I think he's losing himself," I murmured sadly. "I haven't seen much of him lately."

"You should dump him for good," she shot back.

"It's kind of hard to dump him when I haven't seen him," I told her angrily. "What is your deal with him, anyway? Luke is a good friend."

"Let's not go there, okay?" she said.

"We haven't been there, Brenda," I growled.

"Yes we have," she reminded me. "Have you talked to Antonio lately?" she added.

I took a deep breath to try and calm myself. "Jesus, does everyone think I have to call him? Have you talked to him lately?"

"I talk to him all the time," she told me. "Of course, you haven't contacted him since Nashville."

I sighed wearily. "Look, I can't talk about this right now, I'm right in the middle of an investigation. Can I call you back?"

"Will you?" she asked pointedly.

I sighed, giving in to the inevitable; I had to talk to her sometime, her and Antonio both. "Yeah, Brenda. As soon as I get done here."

"Okay," she said reluctantly, "I'll wait for your call."

I hung the phone up and slid it into my inner jacket pocket, then followed the others toward the darkness. They stopped to wait for me and when I was at Cormac's side, I saw broken glass littering the floor from the light fixtures in the ceiling.

Steel crossbeams held up the ceiling of the parking garage and they ran the length of the garage. Three light fixtures near us had been broken and the glass from the bulbs glittered weakly in the light.

"Shall we?" I whispered.

"We shall," Nina whispered back.

We moved forward as a group into the darkness. As soon as I started having difficulty seeing, I blinked to use the trick Luke had taught me with my eyes. Suddenly it wasn't dark at all; I could see everything as if a spotlight had been turned on.

An old Chevy Impala stood about thirty feet away from us with a dark wet stain spreading near the front of the car. We walked closer to the car and I saw a shoe lying on the ground near the front bumper.

I moved behind Cormac and Nina, then walked ahead of them toward the car. I could hear them following, going toward the rear of the car as I swung away from the front of it so I could see what – or who – was lying on the ground. I saw a pant leg attached to the shoe, and realized that the stain was blood. There was no body inside of the clothing, which told me a Kindred had died here; vampires disintegrated rather quickly once they reached final death.

I extended claws on my left hand as I had earlier and heard a noise above me. I raised my hand and the gun toward the ceiling but only caught a glimpse of an aura before the person was gone, moving through the rafters like a rat in the darkness. The aura had been nearly identical to the Kindred we'd seen near Starbucks; frenzied, obsessed and excited. There had only been one difference; this one had black veins running through the aura, a sure sign of Diablerie.

Diablerie occurred when one Kindred drained another's vitae past the point of torpor until there was no life left in the body. If the murdered Kindred was of lower generation than the one draining him, this lowered the generation of the Kindred committing Diablerie. This made it desirable if you were of high generation, but it was also dangerous.

For one thing, the rush was unbelievable, and addicting. It makes you think you can do anything, and yes I speak from experience. I had once drained an assassin that had been sent to kill me, and afterward I'd felt incredible. I'd also seen Michael after he had killed the old prince of Salem; he looked as if he'd fed from someone high on cocaine.

More Kindred would commit Diablerie if not for the black marks. Many Kindred who saw them in another's aura was liable to call a blood hunt against the vampire. Elders don't

appreciate any threat to their existence, and a vampire that would kill one to become stronger was a definite threat. It took years for the marks to fade away completely.

I walked toward the car and saw that Cormac was reaching for the door handle. I brought my vision back to normal just before the dome light came on. Cormac reached in and turned on the headlights, then put both of his hands on the roof of the car and stared down inside of it as if dazed.

Nina moved up behind him and laid a hand on his back. "Are you okay, 'Mac?" she asked.

He jumped at her touch and looked around. "Yeah," he told her, but he still sounded stunned.

"What's wrong?"

He touched her shoulder and looked down at her intently. "I'll tell you later, little one."

For a moment I was jealous of their affection for each other; I missed that more than anything now that Luke wasn't around.

I walked toward the body and reached it just as Cormac bent down and touched the blood. I followed suit and instantly I knew that the man had been a sixth generation Kindred, and that he had last fed two nights ago. There had been very little blood left in the body when this blood was spilled.

I reached for the empty clothing to search for a wallet while Cormac took a watch from the ground to the right of the decayed body. The left sleeve of the shirt had been ripped out at the shoulder and was nowhere in sight.

I didn't find a wallet or any money or belongings and I stood. Cormac was still crouched near the body holding the watch and I knew he was searching for information from it.

Nina and I both moved toward the passenger's side of the vehicle at the same time, but she got to the door first. She leaned in and opened the glove compartment. A moment later she stood with an old vehicle registration from Virginia in her hands.

"Dougal Galloway?" she whispered softly. She looked at Cormac with a puzzled look on her face.

For some reason, the name sounded familiar to me. "Who is Dougal Galloway?" I asked.

"I'm not sure," she replied.

I looked at Cormac and saw him putting the watch on his own wrist.

"Are you so hard up that you need to steal from bodies, Cormac?" I asked caustically.

He glanced at me over the roof of the car. "It's my watch."

"I know that possession is nine tenths of the law," I replied wryly, "but seriously."

"No," he told me. "It's my watch. I gave it to my sire years ago. But this is not Dougal, this is Simon Perone, an aged hunter." He shook his head. "I don't know how he got it."

I glanced at the body, thinking that if he was a hunter, the answer was kind of obvious.

"He seemed kind," Cormac said suddenly. "And there are other things."

"Other things?" Nina asked him.

"Yes," he replied, running his hand along the vinyl top of the car. "This car is part of my first memories, after my embrace."

"You don't remember anything before it, do you," I said softly.

He shook his head.

I smiled ironically. "Maybe we should start a club." I too had no memories prior to my embrace.

A distant noise caught my attention. The sound was that of many clawed feet scrambling across stone, or cement. I looked around for a moment before I realized what it must be.

Nina jumped into the car only a heartbeat ahead of me and she reached across to pull Cormac inside as I shut the door behind me. Cormac closed his door quickly, and only seconds later a hoard of rats engulfed the car.

Nina climbed into the back seat of the car and I glanced around frantically. The windows were covered with the creatures, all trying desperately to get inside. Cormac reached for the ignition, but the keys were gone.

We felt the car rock and heard a thump from the rear of the car. I dove for Cormac's feet, thankful that Jason had taught me how to hot wire. Cormac lifted his feet as I used my night vision to see and I heard his gun clear its holster. Before I could even get the cover off of the ignition box, the back window of the car shattered and rats inundated the car's interior.

I glanced up and saw the imprint of feet in the vinyl top. Cormac opened fire with his semi automatic gun and the footprints disappeared. The car rocked again and suddenly the rats lost their murderous intent. I felt one of the creatures poke it's nose questioningly into my back and I scrambled for the seat, landing on Cormac's legs.

"I'm sorry," I told him as I reached for the driver's door and backed out of the car. I nearly tripped on the empty clothing, but caught myself before I fell. I helped Nina out and we stepped away from the vehicle, walking gingerly between the rats that were clustered everywhere

I could see a large impact dent on the trunk and blood where a body had fallen. The vitae trailed from the ground by the rear of the car into the darkness.

I looked at Nina. "Believe in guns yet?" I asked pointedly.

She didn't answer, choosing instead to return to the car for her cell phone that she had dropped on the back seat.

Cormac rounded the car and together we began tracking the blood trail. We could hear Nina talking to Idella behind us as Cormac followed me, knowing that my vision would see the blood in the darkness. Just as the blood trail disappeared, we heard the sound of a door slamming behind us, and the echo of running feet. We returned to the car.



# BRENDA

Yeah, sister don't cry

Sister don't cry no more

Sister Don't Cry - Collective Soul

Nina told us that Idella wanted us to wait for the clean up crew to arrive, so while Nina and Cormac talked quietly near the rear of the car, I walked over to one of the round building support columns. I remembered that I had promised Brenda I would call her, so I took out my phone and dialed her number. The phone rang for a long time before she picked it up.

"Hello?"

"Did I interrupt you?" I asked, a bit bemused.

"No, I just couldn't find the phone."

I smiled. "What did you need, Brenda?" I asked her.

"Need?" she replied. "I didn't need anything, I just wanted to see how you were."

I knew I should have been checking my messages. "Well, other than a run in with some rats who wanted to be a bit too friendly, I'm fine."

"Rats? Are you sure you're okay?"

"What are you, my mother?" I was starting to feel caged in by her protectiveness of me, although I knew she meant well.

She laughed. "Yeah, I'm *the* Mother."

Belatedly I remembered the herd she had in Salem. "Just because some coven thinks you're the Goddess incarnate, doesn't mean you're *my* mother, Brenda," I told her dryly. "Why did you really call me?"

"Well, you're not exactly keeping touch with anyone now days," she replied.

"Not lately, no." That was an understatement; I hadn't talked to Brenda or Antonio since Luke and I returned to Las Vegas.

"Have you talked to Antonio lately?" she asked.

I shook my head at her persistence. "Between now and the last time I talked to you? No. When was the last time you talked to him?"

"About a week ago," she told me. "He was excited about two Tremere that he had met in Los Angeles."

"Nina Rodriguez and Cormac," I said softly.

"Oh, did he send you babysitters?" I could hear the amusement in her voice and fought to stay calm.

"Not babysitters," I replied in a tight voice. "He sent them here to investigate."

"When are you going to come out and visit me?" Brenda asked.

I was grateful that she had changed the subject, but I wasn't sure I liked the one she chose. "Do you want me to?"

"Yes, why wouldn't I?" she replied.

I closed my eyes and leaned my head back against the pillar of cement behind me. I felt like I was losing control of everything. "I just feel like the black sheep of the family lately," I told her.

"You're not," she said soothingly, "you just need a bit of guidance now and then."

I couldn't hold back the sob that tore through me and I pressed a hand to my lips as if to call it back. I moved around the column so that Nina and Cormac couldn't see me.

"Chris?" Brenda whispered urgently, suddenly concerned. "Talk to me, tell me what's wrong."

"Everything," I told her through my tears. "Everything is screwed up and I don't know what to do."

"Give him time," she soothed.

I knew she meant Jason. "I have given him time," I told her. "Almost two years of it."

"Not enough, Chris," she said. "He needs time to adjust and you have to give it to him."

"I'm not sure there's enough time in the world for him to adjust to this, Brenda," I sobbed quietly.

She paused, then asked, "How bad do you want it, Chris?"

I took a deep breath to control my tears. "More than I can ever remember wanting anything," I told her firmly. God help me, it was true.

"Then don't settle."

"How can I settle for someone who's never around?" I demanded. "I haven't seen Luke in almost a month," I told her.

"Oh, dork boy," Brenda said harshly.

"Why don't you like him?"

"He's Gangrel," she stated, as if that were enough.

"He's not that bad," I replied defensively. "He's my friend."

"You could have picked a more compatible clan," she commented sardonically. "Ventruue perhaps, or Nosferatu."

I let the comment slide and asked Brenda the question I'd been asking myself every night for months. "What if he was right, Brenda? What if I can't deal?"

"Do you love him enough, Chris?" she asked me bluntly.

"How can you ask me that?" I loved him so much I couldn't stand being without him, even with Luke near.

"If you love him enough," she told me, "you can deal with anything."

"Can I?" I hadn't done well dealing with our separation.

"Yes," she replied.

I wiped at my tears and thought about what she had said. I did love Jason and deep down I knew that we were right for each other, no matter what happened to either of us. The only two obstacles I could see were his ego and... Luke.

"Brenda," I said hesitantly, "if I told you something but asked you not to mention it to Antonio, would you?"

"Not if you didn't want me to, Chris," she replied.

I could hear the question in her voice, and I knew I had to trust someone with the secret that had been haunting me for far too long. "Do you remember what you asked me in Nashville?" I asked her.

There was silence for several minutes, and I waited none too patiently for her to remember.

"You mean about dining from someone," she said slowly. It wasn't a question.

"I never did answer you," I reminded her.

"No," she whispered, "you didn't."

I let the silence speak for me.

After a few minutes, she whispered, "How bad is it, Chris?"

"Two out of three," I admitted in a small voice.

"That bastard!" she snarled. "He tricked you didn't he?"

"No," I said too quickly, then thought about it. "I don't think so."

"I'm coming out there," she told me fiercely. "I'll kill that son-of-a-bitch!"

"No," I replied frantically, "no, that's not what I want!" The last thing I wanted was to see Luke dead.

I heard a male voice in the background. "I'll tell you later," Brenda answered softly. "No, everything's going to be all right, but we're going to have a houseguest."

"Who was that?" I asked.

"That's Rafael Brown," she told me.

I didn't recognize the name. "And he is...?"

"My ghoul," she replied.

"Really?" That was a shocker. "When did this happen?"

"About a week ago."

"Kind of sudden, isn't it?" She hadn't even mentioned in her messages that she'd had someone in mind to ghoul. Ghouls are made when a human drinks Kindred blood. The ghoul gets many benefits, but is completely blood bonded to his or her Domitor. And they're not like legend suggests; Kindred ghouls appear perfectly normal, and many live normal although greatly extended lives. Brenda had been a ghoul before her embrace.

"It may be sudden," she told me, "but it's right."

I'm sure she knew what was best for her. "Okay."

"You need to get away from Luke until this wears off," she said firmly, getting back to the problem at hand. "But I'd still like to come out there and stake the bastard."

"Brenda," I reminded her, "he's always been a good friend to me."

"Yeah," she bit out, "such a good friend that he feeds you twice to bond you to him."

"It wasn't like that," I protested hotly. "In both situations I needed the blood, I would have frenzied without it."

"He's a power monger," she all but hissed, "looking for clan secrets."

I couldn't let her continue in this vein; I had to say something to stop her, even if she was hurt by my words. "Like Michael?" Brenda had told me that Michael Moorecock, her ex-Domitor, had stolen certain files from Antonio that contained clan secrets.

She hesitated and I could almost hear the wheels in her mind turning. "Michael was adopted Tremere," she said finally, "he had a right to the information."

"He's not of the blood," I told her strongly. "He shouldn't have access to information that could hurt us all."

"That's our sire's call, Christina," she replied.

"Does he even know that Michael has the files?" I asked.

"Don't you think I'm trying to take care of it?" she demanded.

"Have you told him?" I repeated. When she didn't answer, I closed my eyes. "You haven't, have you?"

"I have an opportunity here to resolve it," she said calmly. "If I can't, then I'll tell him. I have to prove myself to the clan, Chris. And you know as well as I do that if I told Antonio he would turn himself into the council. I can't allow that."

"No," I agreed. Neither of us wanted to see anything happen to our sire, and he would meet final death if he went to the council with this. I sighed. "So you think I should leave Vegas?" I asked.

"It wouldn't be a bad idea, at least for a while," She told me.

"How long before this starts to wear off?" I whispered.

"A while," she said. "Let me talk to Elvira, see if she'll let you come out here and study with us. Who knows, maybe he'll leave Vegas and you can go home in a few months."

"Like I see him now," I muttered.

"But you know he's there, Chris," she replied.

"Yeah." I took a deep breath. "I talked to him tonight," I admitted.

"Maybe you should think about changing your cell phone number or getting Caller ID," she suggested.

"That wouldn't help in this case, Bren," I told her. "I got a hold of him, and it wasn't by phone."

"How did you reach him then?" she asked.

"Do you remember the gadgets we had?"

"Chris," she urged, "you'd better get rid of it."

Could I get rid of it? I reached up and ran my finger around the edge of the circle behind my left ear. It would be so easy to touch the switch and talk to Luke again; it wouldn't matter if he were still angry with me. Just to talk to him again....

"Stop playing with it and take it off," Brenda ordered. Even after all this time, she knew me too well.

I tried to remove the device, but I couldn't bring myself to take it off. "I can't," I breathed softly. I couldn't remove that tie to Luke, the only tie I had left to hang on to.

"Are you alone?" she asked kindly.

"Almost," I said. "Nina and Cormac are nearby." I peeked around the column and saw that they were by the Impala, talking quietly.

"Let me talk to Nina," she urged.

I held my hand over the mouthpiece of the phone and moved into their sight. "Nina!" I called.

She turned and looked at me. "Yeah?"

"Can you come here for a minute?" I asked her.

She said something to Cormac and walked over to me. "What is it?"

"Did Antonio mention my sister Brenda to you?" I inquired softly.

"Yes, he did."

"Well, she's on the phone and would like to talk to you." I held the phone out to her and she took it hesitantly.

After a few pleasantries, Nina looked at me strangely. "She's a bit hostile to me right now," she told Brenda.

"I am not hostile, Nina," I said wearily as I realized that my fingers were again behind my left ear, tracing the outline of the communications device.

"What do you want me to do with it?" she asked into the phone.

She was looking at my left hand and I was instantly suspicious. "With what?"

"Okay." Nina handed the phone back to me. "She wants to talk to you."

I put the phone to my ear, watching Nina intently. "What."

"I want you to promise me two things," Brenda said.

"And that would be?" I asked as Nina moved a bit closer to me.

"First, promise me that you will not hurt Nina."

"Why?"

"Promise me that you won't hurt Nina," she repeated.

I sighed. "I promise that I won't hurt Nina," I agreed, and Nina breathed a sigh of relief.

"Good. Now promise me that you will allow her to do what I've asked of her."

"Jesus, you like to push me, don't you?" I asked in exasperation.

"Chris, trust me on this. Promise me."

Deep down, I knew I could trust Brenda with my life. "I promise. What did you ask her to do?"

"Let me talk to Nina again."

I gave the phone back to Nina with a sigh and leaned back against the post.

Nina stepped closer to me. "Okay," she said as she raised her hand slowly, "just let me..." She took my hand and lowered it from my neck, then patted my shoulder as if to calm me.

I watched her, knowing what she was going to do, and a part of me wanted to kill her for taking my link to Luke away. I closed my eyes and felt her push my hair back, and then her fingers brushed against my skin as she carefully peeled the device away.

I opened my eyes and saw her move back out of my reach. "I've got it," she told Brenda.

"You're lucky I promised not to hurt you," I told her only half in jest.

I took the phone when Nina gave it back to me. "What."

"Do you feel better now?" Brenda asked me.

"No." I felt worse, much.

"You will," she assured me.

"I'll probably thank you for it later," I admitted reluctantly.

"I know," she said warmly. "I'm the Mother, remember?"

I chuckled at that, but sobered quickly. "You'll ask Elvira for me and let me know?"

"I will," she told me. "Take care."

I hung up the phone and put it back in my inside jacket pocket. I rubbed my eyes and started pacing, not even noticing when Nina walked back to Cormac then answered her cell phone when it rang. I wanted to take the phone out again; I wanted to call Luke. I wanted it so badly I could taste it like a film in my mouth. I paced and longed to hear Luke's voice.

# CLAN TIES

There are some bridges that burn  
Beyond recognition beyond repair  
Ruins - Melissa Etheridge

Nina called out to me and I walked over to join them. "Idella wants to talk to you," Nina told me.

I took her phone. "Hello?"

"Christina?" It was definitely Idella, and she sounded pissed.

"Yes, Idella?"

"Our family deals in knowledge," she reminded me, her voice a low growl. "It seems you have had knowledge of something that could harm our family and have withheld it from us."

I closed my eyes but didn't answer her. I wasn't sure if she was talking about the blood bond that I had with Luke or the information that Michael had stolen from Antonio, but silence was the only way I could find out without telling her something she didn't already know.

"I received a call this evening from Salem," she continued after a moment. "It seems you have a stronger tie to the Gangrel than you have let on."

That told me what she knew. "Who did you talk to?" I demanded. I was having difficulty controlling my voice. I hoped that Brenda hadn't let me down in this.

"Does it matter, childe?" Idella replied calmly.

It really didn't, but if Brenda had betrayed me, I would kill her.

"You will come to the chantry with Nina and Cormac tonight, Christina," Idella told me.

"Yes," I agreed, not really having a choice in the matter. She was my Primogen; I had to follow her orders or face clan punishment. "I'll have to stop by my apartment—"

"Your things will be in your rooms here," she said firmly. All Tremere in Vegas kept rooms at the chantry regardless of any other lodgings they may have.

"All of my things?"

"Your personal belongings, yes."

I rubbed my eyes feeling like things had moved way beyond my control. Maybe they had been for quite some time without my realizing it. "Will you make sure my trunk is included?"

"What is in it, Christina?" she asked.

"Personal things, Idella," I told her firmly. "Things of no consequence to the clan."

"I will make sure it is taken care of," she promised. "You should be on your way now, dawn is coming soon."

"Yes, Idella."

I hung up the phone and handed it back to Nina, then whispered a harsh expletive.

"What is it?" Nina asked.

"I'll be coming with you to the chantry," I told her. I stalked back to the column I had stood by and stood with my hands leaning against it for a moment. Abruptly I drew back and punched the column. I felt the skin on my hand give tear under the impact and the pain helped me to get hold of myself. I cradled the hand against my body and let the pain wash over me until I was sure my emotions were controllable. I knew Nina was watching as I healed my hand and flexed the fingers carefully.

When I walked back to the Impala, Cormac had put the remains of the body in the trunk and lowered the top. I got into the back without a word and he drove us to my car, still parked in front of O'Shay's.

Nina rode with me to the chantry, I think to make sure I was all right. I knew I couldn't keep the worry off my face, but I didn't know her well enough to discuss it with her.

When we got to the chantry I excused myself and went to my rooms. I hadn't been in them for a while, but even so they didn't look unused. Everything from my apartment except the furniture was stacked in boxes in the bedroom. Someone had taken my toiletries and placed them in the bathroom for me.

I went to the trunk and immediately noticed that the ward against Kindred I had placed was no longer in effect. With trepidation I lifted the lid, but everything seemed to be just as I had left it. I breathed a sigh of relief and closed the trunk.

Taking out my cell phone, I called Brenda. I knew that the sun was up in Salem, but I wanted to leave a message on her machine. It said, simply, "Who spilled the milk?"

I looked at the phone for a long moment, then sat down on the bed. I knew it was time, long past time. I carefully dialed Antonio's number from memory.

"Hello?"

"Antonio," I said softly, closing my eyes and clutching the phone. It was so good just to hear his voice.

Silence burned the line. "Christina?" He sounded surprised to hear from me.

"I know it's been a long time since I've contacted you, sire," I told him humbly. "I have no excuse for it, only my deepest apologies."

"It's good to hear from you, childe," he replied. "Why didn't you contact me mentally?"

He spoke of the telepathy he had taught me. "I didn't think of it," I answered. The truth was that I hadn't used it because it would have allowed him to know more than I would have been willing to say.

"What have you been doing lately?"

"Studying," I told him, "and doing some investigating for Idella."

"Have you met Nina and Cormac?" There was warmth in his voice at Nina's name, but I refused to be jealous about it.

"Yes, I have been working with them."

"And are they playing well?" he asked.

"With me or each other?" I replied wryly. "They have been doing fine."

"That is good to know," he said. "Have you talked to Jason lately?"

My heart clenched in my chest and I closed my eyes at the unexpected pain. "No," I whispered softly. "Have you?"

"A little."

"How is he?" I tried to keep the tremor from my voice, but I couldn't.

"The same," Antonio said sadly. "I have hopes that he will come around and call you soon, Christina."

"As do I," I confessed. "Look, I need to go, it's nearly dawn. I just wanted to—to talk to you."

"I know. I love you, Christina," he told me softly.

I closed my eyes again, gratified that he still cared about me. "I love you too, sire."

"Good day."

"Good day." I hung up the phone and put it on the bedside table. I was glad that Antonio hadn't heard about the blood bond yet, but I knew it was too much to hope that he'd never find out. At least I had been able to talk to him once more before he lost all respect for me.

I changed into men's pajamas that I had taken from the trunk. They had been Jason's, and I had taken them from his suitcase before I had returned the rest his belongings to him. A part of me wondered if he'd ever missed them. I laid down on the bed and fell asleep as dawn crept over the desert city of Las Vegas.



# REMEMBERING

Do you remember how we were?

Do you remember summer days?

Loaded - Ricky Martin

*The mountain breeze was cool as I stood looking down at a city nestled in the valley below. The sun was warm on my skin and I turned to stare up at it in surprise.*

*"Tina," I heard a voice behind me say softly. It was a voice I knew from the few dreams I remembered of the man that I'd named Robert.*

*I turned and there he was. His green eyes smiled at me, his dark hair blew softly in the cool breeze. He had a full beard and mustache, and he was several inches taller than I was.*

*I looked down at the city. "Why are we here?" I asked.*

*"I don't know," he replied. "This is your dream, I'm only along for the ride. Do you remember this place?"*

*"Helena?" I knew I had grown up in Helena, Montana, but I didn't remember being there. Part of the price I'd paid for my embrace was that I'd forgotten my mortal life.*

*"The mountain," he said sadly.*

*"I've dreamed about it before," I told him. "I've dreamed about you before, but I don't know anything more about you than your name."*

*"You'll remember." His haunted smile made me think he hoped I wouldn't.*

*"Can't you tell me?"*

*"I could," he replied, "but it wouldn't seem real to you, and you would always wonder if I only told you what you wanted to hear. This is a dream, after all."*

*I nodded thoughtfully and looked down at the town, trying to remember what it looked like close up. Suddenly we were standing in front of an old restaurant downtown looking toward the statue of a gold miner panning in the river.*

*"Tina," he said carefully. "Do you remember this day?" He pointed down the gulch toward downtown.*

*With a start I saw a teenaged me walking beside a younger version of my father. We were talking and laughing softly, preparing to cross the busy street and pass in front of the gold miner. My hair was long and loose, and I wore denim jeans and a white T-shirt with running shoes. It looked like something I might still like to wear. Papa wore the garb of his chosen profession; a priest's uniform.*

*As Robert and I watched the pair crossed the street and just as they reached the other side, a young boy shot away from his mother and into traffic. A large van slammed on his brakes and tried to stop, but he'd been going too fast. The squeal of his brakes echoed through the canyon of stores. The teen me turned and raised her hand and I could feel the force of my—her magic reach out and stop the van only inches before it struck the boy.*

*I saw Papa's face grow hard as the younger me turned to face him. I saw fear in my own eyes when Papa demanded to know when Robert had taught me the devil's tricks. It was hard for me to watch myself plead with Papa to try and make him listen, then see him storm away.*

*The girl stared after Papa for a moment, then ran up the gulch toward where Robert and I stood. She dashed past our position running as fast as she could and quickly passed out of sight.*

*When she was gone, I looked questioningly up at Robert.*

*"Did this really happen," I asked him, "or is this a dream?"*

*"You don't remember?"*

*"I don't remember very much," I admitted, "and nothing at all of Helena."*

*"Why did you bring us here, 'Tina?" he asked me. "Why this day?" His voice was sad and he seemed depressed.*

*"I don't know," I whispered. "This was real wasn't it? This really happened."*

*He wouldn't answer me; he just walked to the window of the art gallery next door and stood looking at the paintings on display.*

*"Robert," I said. "What happened on this day? Why are you upset that we're seeing it again?"*

*He turned toward me abruptly. "Take us somewhere else, 'Tina," he pleaded softly, "anywhere else."*

*Seeing him so distressed saddened me. I closed my eyes, lifted my face to the sun, and wished us elsewhere.*

*"No," Robert whispered desolately. "Not here."*

*I opened my eyes and looked around. We were standing on the side of the mountain about twenty feet below the peak. The ground was rocky and desolate, treacherous to stand on, let alone try to walk across. A large outcropping of rock loomed nearby, hanging over the entrance to a cave.*

*"Eagle's Peak," I said as I recognized the outcropping from a previous dream I'd had of Robert.*

*"You remember?" he asked sharply.*

*I shook my head. "I remember dreaming of you and this place when I was unconscious after the accident in LA," I told him. "I remember you telling me that I had to survive. How did you know?"*

*Robert looked back at Eagle's Peak. "I'm just a figment of your dream, Christina," he replied sadly.*

*I didn't believe him but before I say as much, I saw the younger me running up the slope toward the cave. A man in his early twenties was with her, struggling to keep up. She looked terrified, and called Robert's name.*

*I glanced at Robert but he was looking at the cave. I followed his gaze to see a younger version of him emerge from the darkness.*

*I felt his magic help the running pair climb the rest of the way over the loose rock and gravel. I watched while the teen me threw herself into the young Robert's arm and he held her close to her chest.*

*"Papa knows," I—she cried. "He's going to kill you!"*

*"Tina, love," he said soothingly. "I'll be fine, he won't kill me."*

*"Do you promise?" she pleaded up at him.*

*I took a step forward to hear their words better, but Robert turned away as if unable to watch.*

*Everyone turned to look down the mountain as angry voices floated up.*

*"Tina, you have to get out of here," he told her harshly.*

*"No," she protested. "I can't leave you to him, he'll kill you!"*

*The young Robert grabbed the other Christina's shoulders. "I promise nothing will happen to me, 'Tina, but you have to be safe."*

*"You lied," I whispered to the man beside me, somehow knowing that something very bad was about to happen.*

*"I had to," he replied in an agonized voice, "otherwise you never would have left me and we both be dead."*

*The other Robert turned to the man who had followed her up the mountain. "Carl, take her away and keep her safe," he ordered.*

*The other me leaned up and kissed Robert's cheek. "I love you," I heard her whisper.*

*"I love you," he replied, then pushed her gently toward Carl.*

*The pair ran past my position and reached an area of large boulders just as a group of men emerged from the trees.*

*I watched helplessly as the young Robert fought using his magic against that of the hunters who sought to kill him. I gasped when they drove him back into the cave and couldn't stop myself from closing my eyes and screaming when the stone that made up the Eagle's Peak above the cave began to fall.*

*Almost immediately the sound of falling rocks stopped and I knew that Robert and I were somewhere else.*

*"'Tina?" Robert whispered. "Where are we?"*

*I opened my eyes and looked around. A bit of light shone from the hallway and in the dimness I recognized the wine cellar of the monastery Jason had taken me to in Italy. I remembered the morning the mage had come for Jason, the old man who had saved me and led me into the sunlight unharmed.*

*"Italy," I told him, my voice heavy with the memories flooding my mind.*

*"What are we doing here?" he asked.*

*"I don't know." The room was very dark so I blinked to enhance my vision in the darkness and suddenly I could see just fine.*

*"What's wrong with your eyes?" Robert asked suddenly. "They're glowing!"*

*I looked at him and he backed away a step.*

*I smiled. "It's just a figment of your dream, Robert" I told him.*

*He returned my grin. "I've missed your wit, 'Tina," he said affectionately. "I've missed everything about you."*

*"Are you a ghost? Are you haunting me because we were lovers?" I asked abruptly.*

*"What?" Somehow I had shocked him.*

*"We loved each other," I said softly. "Were we lovers?"*

*"'Tina," he replied gently. "There are more reasons to love someone than for sex. And who says I'm haunting you?"*

*"You haunt my dreams. If we weren't lovers, then what were we to each other? What would tie us together like this even after your death?"*

*He started to answer but we heard a scream coming from above us. I dashed into the hallway, Robert following closely behind. I burst out into the sunlight and I was blinded for several seconds. When I could see again, I gasped in horror.*

*The altar of the chapel was only feet away and there was a figure bound to it by glowing bands of blue light--the same bands that had held Jason to it when I'd been forced to leave*

*him to the mercy of the crone. The only difference was that Jason wasn't bound to the altar this time, Lena was.*

*As if my thoughts summoned him, I looked up to see the mage standing nearby with long stringy dark hair and a wild look in his eyes. He was tall, thin and he laughed menacingly at my distress.*

*I didn't see Robert and didn't have time to look around for him before the mage raised his arms to hurl the blue light at me. I raised my hand but there was nothing I could do to stop the agony that wrapped around my body. I screamed in anguish, but suddenly the pain was gone.*

*I looked at the mage and saw that his attention was centered on Robert. Blue tongues of fire shot toward Robert, only to be stopped by a green stream of light coming from Robert's hands. The dueling magic got brighter and brighter the longer the two men fought until I had to cover my eyes. I didn't see the explosion that sent me spinning away from the monastery and back into reality.*

I woke alone in darkness. I didn't know what had ripped me from sleep, but because I didn't sense anything threatening in the room, I knew that it must have been another nightmare I couldn't remember.

I reached over and turned on the bedside lamp. I didn't know exactly what time it was, but it had to be only minutes before sunset. I stumbled into the bathroom and showered quickly, trying to wash away the remnants of dread that remained from my nightmare.

# DUTY AND FRIENDSHIP

Loneliness up ahead, emptiness behind  
Where do I go?

From the Bottom of My Broken Heart - Brittany Spears

When I returned to the bedroom, I saw the message light blinking on my cell phone and pressed the necessary buttons to retrieve it.

"I tried calling your apartment but the phone is disconnected," I heard Brenda say. "What's the matter, didn't you pay your bill? Or are you just prepping to come out here?"

I dialed the number to check it myself and sure enough, it was out of service. I was confused and a bit angry, wondering who had cancelled the service. I called Brenda.

"Is it sundown there already?" she asked after I identified myself.

"What happened, Brenda?" I asked calmly. It was way too late for hysterics now.

"You mean with your message?" She sounded a bit confused. "What happened?"

I sighed. "I was chastised by Idella last night for not telling her about the situation I'm in," I told her.

Shocked silence filled the line. "How did she find out?"

"You tell me and we'll both know." I hadn't really believed that Brenda had had anything to do with Idella finding out my secret.

I heard a woman's voice in the background and Brenda asked me to wait for a minute. When she came back to the phone, she asked, "Your apartment has been taken care of?"

"Yeah, all my stuff is at the chantry," I told her.

I waited again while she talked to other person, and when she returned to the phone her voice was strained. "Did you hear what Elvira asked?"

"No." The voice had been too muffled for me to tell that it had been Elvira Van Dorn, the prince of Salem.

"She said you have a week to get here," Brenda informed me.

I covered my eyes; there was absolutely no way I could deny a Tremere Prince. "Okay."

"She's agreed," Brenda told Elvira.

This time I heard her reply clearly. "See that she's here."

"Christina," Brenda warned me, "you'd better be here in a week. You don't want me to come get you."

I grimaced; if Brenda came to Vegas for me, it was very likely that Luke would die. "No."

"Do you want me to arrange for your things to be shipped here?" she offered.

"What about my car?"

"We can get you a new one," she replied.

"Whatever," I said quietly. "Just... make the arrangements for me. I'll fly there in a week, after we've found this killer."

"Good," Brenda said. "Elvira has moved out of the Bathori mansion, and there's plenty of room for you there with me."

"I could stay at the chantry—"

"No," she interrupted. "You can stay with me."

I didn't argue because that was what I wanted too. "I guess I'll see you in a week then."

We rung off and I proceeded to get ready for the evening. When I was dressed conservatively with Jason's cross tucked under my shirt with the ring, I walked down to Nina's room and knocked on the door to see how she was doing.

Nina was dressed and ready for the evening. She told me that Idella had given her a ritual to study and I offered to help her. We went back to my rooms so that I could coach her as I readied my things for shipment to Salem. I told her that I had spoken to Antonio and that I was going to Salem to study with my sister.

It didn't take me long to separate the items I would keep with me from those I wanted sent ahead. I made sure that everything in the trunk went into a carryon bag and under the bed. I added my notebook computer and its case to the pile of things I would take with me, along with a suitcase full of clothes, including those I had worn the previous night, which had been thoughtfully cleaned for me during the day.

Nina and I went to look for Cormac and found him coming out of the armory. "Stocking up?" I asked him.

He shrugged. "Preparing. The ammo I had last night didn't seem to faze our killer."

"Speaking of which," Nina said, "what are we going to do to find him?"

"I think we did pretty good last night," Cormac replied. "We should probably go out into the city and ask around, maybe some of the other Kindred have seen him."

"Good idea," I said. "TBA and Everlasting Moments are the big hangouts in town. We should hit them up, which one do you want to go to first?"

"Everlasting Moments?" Cormac asked. "What's that?"

I looked down with a smile. "A brothel."

"Do you go there often?" Nina said, her interest peaked.

"No, but Luke likes it," I told her. I didn't want to meet up with Luke until the blood bond was gone. On the other hand, I really wanted to see Luke.

Cormac thought for a moment, then mused, "I know a Luke Thomas from LA who moved to Vegas about two years ago, would that be your Luke?"

I tried not to wince at his words; it was more likely that I was Luke's Christina. "Yes."

"Luke is Gangrel," he said. "I don't know him that well, but perhaps we should talk to him about the killer."

"I talked to him last night," I said firmly. "He doesn't know anything. Maybe we should start at TBA," I added quickly.

"Yes," he replied. "Give our eyes a chance to adjust to clothing after O'Shay's."

The laugh we shared felt good on my wounded soul and we headed for my car. When we were on our way, Cormac leaned forward with his elbows on the seats. I looked up, then adjusted the rear view mirror so that I could see his face clearly.

"Did you need something?" I asked.

"I'm just curious," he said slowly, obviously trying not to offend me. "Would you mind if I asked you a question about yourself?"

I shrugged. "I guess, if I can reserve the right not to answer if you get too personal."

He nodded. "I noticed last night that you showed certain... traits that appeared to be Protean. May I ask if you've always had these abilities or if you've learned them?"

"I learned them from Luke," I said guardedly. "He's been showing me a few of his clan tricks. He lives with me." Lived; I kept forgetting that my apartment was no longer home.

Cormac nodded thoughtfully. "I've seen you use the eyes and the claws," he told me. "May I ask what other abilities you have in that area?"

"That is the extent of them right now," I replied.

"I value knowledge in all forms," Cormac said, "I wonder if it would be possible...."

"If you would like me to show you what I've learned, Cormac, I can try to teach you," I offered.

"That would be appreciated," he told me. "My thanks."

"Did you know Luke well?" I couldn't help but ask.

"Not really," he replied. "He left LA a couple of years ago. I heard he was living with someone in Vegas, but I had no idea who."

I closed my eyes and felt the pain of Luke's avoidance shoot through me. I heard a horn blow and looked up in time to jerk the wheel to the right and avoid the semi that had been heading straight for us.

Nina clutched at the dash. "Be careful," she warned. "I've heard about your driving. Do you want me to drive?"

I chuckled. "You know Anna?" I asked.

"Yeah," Nina said, "but keep your eyes on the road!"

I drove for several minutes in silence, then said, "Do you—" My voice and I had to clear my throat before I could go on. "Do you know a Nosferatu that hangs around the prince in LA?" I asked. I had asked Nina about Jason the night before, but she hadn't heard of him.

Cormac thought for a moment. "I have heard of a Nosferatu named Jason that has the protection of the prince," he told me.

Graves. "He would," I said, my voice hard and bitter.

I saw Cormac shoot me a look in the mirror. "Do you know this Jason?" he asked softly.

"I used to," I admitted reluctantly, "before. Have you seen your prince lately?" I tried to keep my voice calm, almost nonchalant.

Cormac shook his head. "I don't get out too much," he said. "People usually come to me, not the other way around."

We talked about mutual acquaintances in LA until I pulled into the parking lot of TBA.

# THE PRIEST AND THE KILLER

And when you spit, you better mean it  
You got to make 'em all believe it  
Stick To Your Guns - Bon Jovi

The three of us went inside and took a table near the dance floor. The bar wasn't crowded as it was still early yet. A jukebox played music softly from the corner and there were three other Kindred in the room. I also noticed that Cross was also there with two of his men.

We had just begun discussing what our next step in the investigation should be when I saw Nina and Cormac glance behind me. I turned and saw what looked like a monk walking by the bar with a glass of milk in his hand. The Kindred at the end of the bar moved away from the man like he was terrified. The monk didn't seem to notice.

The closer the monk got to us, the more unease I felt. I slid my chair back against the wall and heard Nina do the same. The monk's cross glowed dimly in the shadows of the room the way religious object sometimes did when infused with true faith. The glow increased as he approached us, and he stopped about five feet from our table. I looked at his aura and my apprehension magnified a hundred fold; he was a shapeshifter, and the shade of his aura told me he had great faith in God. I bent slightly and pulled the Glock from my boot. It held silver rounds, and I didn't think Cormac was prepared for Lupines. I knew Nina wasn't, for all I knew she didn't *believe* in werewolves.

The werewolf saw my movement and held up his hands, the left one still holding the milk glass. Doing his best to appear harmless, he looked directly at Cormac. "I mean you no harm, Uncle."

I glanced sharply at Cormac, but there was no recognition on his face.

"You must have me mistaken for someone else," he replied. "I am not your uncle."

"You are Cormac Brennan," the monk said, his voice heavy with an Irish brogue.

"I am Cormac," the Kindred agreed. "But I'm not your uncle."

"You are Cormac Brennan, my uncle." He sounded very certain. "You were embraced nineteen years ago on my birthday."

Cormac looked shocked and I realized that he truly didn't remember the Lupine.

Nina had scooted her chair long ways back from the table by now. I knew from her reaction to my own cross that the monk's crucifix must have been terrifying her.

"I hate to interrupt a family reunion," I said dryly, "but could you tuck that cross under your... robe?"

The monk seemed startled, then looked down at the glowing cross. Without hesitation he tucked it inside his robes and immediately I felt much better. I could see that Nina did too. I slowly returned the gun to its hiding place; a hunter wouldn't have given up the cross so easily and I didn't think this Lupine wanted to kill his uncle.

"You seem to know much about me," Cormac said softly, "but volunteer nothing of yourself."

"I am Stephen Brennan, your nephew," he replied.

Cormac studied him carefully for what seemed like a long time, a frown on his face.

I knew what he was doing, but I also knew from experience that it wouldn't do any good. "Cormac," I prompted softly, "if you try to push it, it won't come." Memories couldn't be forced from the other side of the wall that held them back, they had to be coaxed forth, wooed.



Stephen glanced at me, then returned his gaze to Cormac. "Are you suffering from amnesia?"

Cormac nodded. "A touch of it, yes." He gestured to the one empty chair at our table. "Would you care to sit down?"

Stephen walked behind Cormac, who looked at me as if he trusted me to watch his back. The werewolf sat down and put his milk on the table before him.

Cormac introduced Nina and I to Stephen, who said, "Peace be unto you."

I nodded at him, but didn't reply.

"And to you," Nina murmured.

Stephen turned back to Cormac. "Uncle, I may know a way to help you recover your memories."

Cormac glanced at Nina and I, then back at his nephew. "How would you go about doing so?" he asked.

When Stephen replied, it was not in English.

I leaned closer to Nina. "Do you speak Gaelic?" I whispered, guessing at the language he spoke.

"No," she replied softly.

I sipped my drink and watched the two, wondering what they were saying. At one point, Stephen looked at me while saying something to Cormac, but I had no idea what it was.

After a few minutes, I heard a cell phone ringing across the room. One of the Kindred in the bar, Evan, answered and spoke into it briefly, then threw the pool stick down and dashed toward the door. I noticed that his aura showed a lot of aggression as he ran out of the bar.

"What was that all about?" I asked Nina. When she shrugged, I looked at Cormac. The colors of his aura were shifting and mottled, and I knew that meeting his nephew was very confusing for him. The primary pattern seemed to be one of sadness and suspicion.

"Nina," I said, thinking about Evan's sudden departure from the club, "Why don't you call Idella and see if she's heard—" I broke off as I heard yelling from the alley behind the club. I whispered a hasty apology and leapt toward the emergency exit on the back wall.

Cross and his companions reached the door before me and I had to wait for them to go through before I could. His younger companion had his gun drawn as he stepped out into the night.

When I joined them, I saw a group of Kindred near the back of the alley, some of whom were shouting 'Stop!' I pulled my gun and ran in that direction. I noticed that Evan was among them, as was nearly every other Gangrel in the city.

When I got closer, I recognized the Kindred we had been searching for holding a woman before him as a shield. His arm was around her neck and waist, trapping her arms tight to her sides. Donna was trying to talk the guy down, and many of the others, including Cormac who had followed Nina and me, had their guns drawn. Donna moved forward, and the Gangrel moved back, dragging the woman with him.

Cross stepped forward, gun drawn. "Enough of this shit," he growled. "The bastard's going down!"

I caught a glimpse of something thrown past Cross' face, then saw Stephen shift to a markedly larger form. I stepped back several feet before I could stop myself.

"Nina," Cormac called out to her, "call Idella!"

Donna turned and shot Cormac a nasty look. "Who the fuck are you?" she demanded. "This is my clan, and I'll take care of it. You stay out of it." She glanced at Stephen then added, "And your little friend, too."

At that moment the Gangrel pushed the girl toward those Kindred nearest him and turned to run. Cormac's gun rang out just as Nina called "Dennis!" and the Gangrel fell burning to the ground.

"Oh, shit!" Donna exclaimed in disgust.

I holstered my main weapon and reached for the silver loaded one from my ankle, watching Stephen walk forward just behind Cormac. When his uncle turned and murmured something to the monk, he shifted back to human and I left my gun where it was.

I pulled out my cell phone and called Eleni at the chantry. I spent a few minutes telling her what happened while the Gangrels, Cross and his friends melted into the night. When I looked back at the body, only Nina, Cormac and Stephen remained in the alley.

# OBLIGATION

I will stand firm in the tempest

I will ride destiny's trail

Yes I Am - Melissa Etheridge

I had just returned the phone to my inner jacket pocket when it rang again. I answered it reluctantly thinking it was Idella.

"Christina?" Not Idella, it was a man's voice, one I thought I recognized.

"Mikael?" Mikael Provinof was Lena's fiancé and the last person I would expect to call me.

"Yeah," he replied, his voice lightly accented with his native Austrian. "Look, have you talked to Lena lately?"

I walked a little away from the others and turned my back to them. "Not lately, Mikael. Why?" I felt kind of bad about not talking to her, but I hadn't been able face talking to her knowing how I'd failed Jason and the fact that I was sleeping with Luke.

"She's missing." His voice was distant, almost lost.

"What?" I demanded.

"I tried calling everyone and no one has heard from her or called her away," Mikael told me. "She was ill. She went to bed early and I was working on a cabinet in the hut," he continued. "When I took coffee up to her room the next morning she was gone. We've looked everywhere for her, Christina, and can't find her. Can you come?"

I expected to fall under severe clan punishment for the foreseeable future. I'd been ordered to get to Salem in less than a week and it would probably take longer than that to help Lena. Idella was already angry with me and Antonio would be too when he found out about the blood bond. If I didn't make it to Salem in time, it was realistic to expect that the clan would call a blood hunt for me. Despite the overwhelming reasons I had to refuse, I found that I simply could not.

"I'll be there as soon as I can, Mikael." I'd work things out somehow or die for my efforts, but there was no way I could walk away from Lena when she needed me.

"Is there any way you can reach Talon for me, Christina?" Mikael asked. He seemed confused, distracted, not like himself at all. He was usually strong and certain, decisive and dependable. "I have no idea how to contact him."

Lovely. Just what I needed. Not. "I will try, Mikael," I promised, although I dreaded so much as hearing the Kindred's voice. "Is there anything missing?"

"I can't understand what happened," he said. He wasn't the type to rattle on, yet that was just what he was doing. "Nothing is missing. I went through her closet and only a robe she'd bought a month or so ago was gone. It was big, you know, but it had decorations down the front."

"Like a ceremonial robe?" I asked.

"Yeah. And some slippers I gave her, they were gone too." He paused and sighed. "You know, there was one strange thing," he said. A corner of her dresser was gone. Just gone, like someone had cut it off, but there were no tool marks on the edge."

Mikael was falling apart and not making any sense to me. I knew I had to get to the Holding quickly. "Is your family there to help you?" I asked him.

"You can get here as fast as they can," he reminded me. It had taken two full days and nights of travelling for Mikael's family to bring me to the Holding after they had captured me.

"I think you would be of more help, Christina, all things considered. I'll make arrangements for you to be brought here from the village."

"Perhaps the box would be useful if it is still available," I suggested. His family had built a makeshift coffin just for me and nailed me inside for my trip to the Holding. Mikael had modified the box so that all the locks were on the inside. It wasn't comfortable by any means, but at least it was safe.

"Hurry, Christina," he pleaded.

Tears filled my eyes and I struggled to hold them back. "I will be there as soon as I can, Mikael."

I disconnected the call and immediately dialed Brenda's number. I only told her that Lena was missing and that Mikael had called asking me to help find her. "Can you call Idella and let her know what's going on?" I asked. "And let Elvira know that I will come to Salem as soon as she is found?"

"She won't be very happy," she warned me. I knew she wanted to tell me not to go to Austria, but she knew me well to think I'd listen to her. "I'll have to see what I can do."

It was all I could hope for. "Would it be too much to ask for you to make plane reservations for me?" I knew she was good at that type of thing and trusted her to keep me safe. "A private jet would be the best, I'll take a commercial airline to New York, but then I need to get to Austria as quickly as possible."

"I can handle that."

"One more thing, sister," I said quietly.

"Anything."

"Can you contact Talon Graves?" If I talked to the bastard I would forget the dangers of angering both a prince and an elder to tell him a few choice truths. "Antonio would know how to get a hold of him."

Brenda only hesitated for only a moment. "I will tell him that Lena is in danger."

"Thank you," I whispered. It was a relief to know that there was still someone in my life I could count on.

I put my phone back in the inner pocket of my jacket and strode quickly toward the others. "I have to go, now," I told them.

Cormac looked up. "Where?"

"Austria." When he shot me a confused look, I added, "To repay an old debt to a close friend."

"How long will you be gone?" Nina asked quietly.

"Until I find her," I told her. "She's a good friend. I have to leave now." I offered them a ride to the chantry, as I had to pick up some things there before going to the airport.

Cormac asked if I could drop him and Stephen off at a coffee shop near the chantry and I agreed. We walked around the building and piled into my car. Once we were on our way, I called the airport and made flight arrangements on the next plane to New York.

When Cormac got out of the car at the café, he turned to Nina. "I want to talk to you later, little one," he told her cryptically. "I know what he was to you." He thanked me for the ride and said goodbye, as did Stephen.

Nina and I continued on to the chantry where we parted company.

I had already packed my traveling clothes to fly to Salem, but now I changed some of the items in my suitcases. I made sure that I had my "battle" clothes, the leather pants, boots,

jacket and gloves that made me look so much like a Gangrel. I also packed several boxes of ammunition in a case specially designed to bypass airport security.

Knowing my trip would take me through Paris, I called a Tremere woman I had met on my last visit there. Her name was Thalia, and she agreed to ask the prince if my short stopover required me to meet with him.

I opened my computer case and flipped a hidden switch to reveal the false bottom. I placed my guns and knife inside the compartment, knowing that I would want my weapons close in case anything came up. I refused to think what my helping Lena might cost me if I didn't find her quickly and make it to Salem on time.

With one suitcase, a carryon bag, and my computer case, I walked out of the Las Vegas Tremere Chantry, not knowing when or if I would ever return.

I didn't look back.