



CHRISTINA: VOWS

© Cathy McQuillin 2001

Rescue.....	2
These Dreams	5
Nightmares	8
Memories	10
Magic and Duty	16
Lord Malcolm.....	20
Snapshots of the Past	30
Dreamwalking	36
Gateways.....	40
Vows	48
Gifts	53
The Garden.....	57
Happily Ever After.....	60

RESCUE

The stars above shine down below
The fever you hold on this night deathly cold
The Sky is a Poisonous Garden - Concrete Blonde

Jason Kline and I were standing near the front door of the house waiting for a signal to move in. My sister Brenda Thompson and her fiancé and ghoul Rafe Brown had gone inside to see if his sister Samantha was being held inside. Samantha's ex-boyfriend, Simon Finch, had run the car she and her lover AJ McLean were in off the road and taken her prisoner.

Jason and I had joined the Tremere security force when we'd relocated to Salem a few weeks before. I had come here on orders from the clan, and Jason had followed because he loved me. Elvira Van Dorn, the prince of the city, had agreed to let Jason help with security because she thought it would be good for me.

Frasier O'Connell had joined the security team too. He was my ghoul, brought into this world from his own after he'd helped us find my friend Lena Stockton. Frasier had been bored with his world, and he found the tales I'd told him of my fascinating. I'd ghouled him, and now he was getting all the excitement he could have ever hoped for. He was on the other side of the house with AJ and Rafe's cousin, Brian Littrel.

A shot rang out from the bowels of the house. Without a word Jason and I went in carefully, he moving to the right and me to the left. We made our way through the empty house to the kitchen where we found the stairs to the basement. There was light from the bottom of the steps, so we went down, Jason going first.

At the bottom of the stairs were two doors. One was closed, but through the other we could see Brenda and Rafe. We went into the room and immediately saw the nearly decapitated body to our left. There was blood on the wall and the face was gone. It must have been Simon, the man we'd come here to kill.

"Do you see any keys anywhere?" I heard Brenda ask.

Jason looked across the room to where a young girl was chained to the wall. It was Samantha, and her face looked like she'd run into a brick wall. "We don't need no stinking keys," he told Brenda as he started across the room.

I followed and pulled out the lockpicking tools he had given me. In short order we got her unchained and Rafe picked her up gently in his arms. She looked weak, out of it really. Simon must have been going at her for a while.

A noise from the doorway made Jason and I spin, our guns pulled. I was happy to see that I was only a split second slower than he was. From the corner of my eye I saw Brenda turn too, her Glock in her hand.

"Hey, hey," Micky George protested, his hands up. He was the head of the security team. When we relaxed, he looked down at the body. "I see you found him."

"Prudence is in Boston," Brenda told him. "He didn't know where."

"What the fuck is she in Boston for?" Micky demanded.

She told him that Prudence Gentry was going after Corrine Wright, and they both took out their phones. Prudence was another Tremere in Salem, one who seemed bent on breaking all of the rules. Corrine was protected by the clan through a contract with her mother, Eliza Gentry. We could not allow Prudence to hurt the girl, no matter what the cost.

I tore a corner from my shirt off and tried to clean the blood off the Samantha's face, but I only succeeded in smearing it around. She needed healing and a bath, in that order.

"What the hell is going on?" I asked Brenda when she'd hung up her phone.

"Get Samantha out of here," she ordered. She was upset, so I let it pass.

"Okay, take her home, your house?" I questioned. "The restaurant? You want me to call Graham?" Graham was a mage with a touch for healing. The last I knew he was at the restaurant we'd found AJ at earlier, but God only knew where he was now.

"My house." She looked at Jason. "Have you seen Frasier and the guys?"

"They're outside," he answered.

"They're outside," she repeated, a little relieved. "AJ's not in here." It wouldn't do to have the normals see what we really were.

"The last time I saw them they were outside," he added. "I don't know if he's coming in or not."

"Okay, do you want us to call Graham?" I interrupted. I thought the girl was a little more important than a mortal we could dominate if we had to. "Have him meet us at the house?"

"Yes." Her phone rang and it was Jared Smith from the Black Rose Coven letting Brenda know that Corrine was safe in Nashville, although I couldn't begin to guess how he'd gotten her there so quickly.

When he got off the phone, Micky interrupted to ask her where they were.

"They're in Nashville," she told him.

"They're in Nashville?" he demanded.

"Tennessee."

"Fucking mage," Micky murmured as he took out his cell phone again to call Ford Radek, the Tremere chantry Regent.

Without a word Rafe headed for the stairs and Jason moved ahead to watch for danger. I followed, keeping an eye on the other doorways in the hall. A few minutes later we ran into Frasier, Brian and AJ just outside of the house.

While Rafe took the girl to the car I called the chantry and got Ford. He agreed to send Graham to Brenda's so he could help Samantha, and I told him that we'd keep him advised of her progress.

Micky and Brenda caught up to us and she got into the car while Micky called for a cleanup crew. I would have stuck around to wait with him, but he told us to go on ahead and make sure nothing happened on the way to Brenda's.

The storm was letting up a little as Jason drove us through town, although it was still raining hard. A lot of the streets were flooded, and large sections were out of power. Jason drove as quickly as he could and we got to the house just as the others were getting out of the car.

AJ and Rafe got Samantha into the house and Brenda told them to take her up to her bedroom. It occurred to me that I hadn't heard Brenda's ghoul say anything at all, and he looked like he was going to be sick. I had to wonder if he was the one who'd killed Simon, and if he had, if that had been his first kill.

I caught Brenda's arm before she could follow them. "I'll wait for Graham, bring him up when she comes," I told her. She seemed pale, shaken. "Are you okay, Brenda? I mean, is Rafe going to be okay? I know Samantha will be taken care of but are you guys okay?"

"We'll be all right, yeah," she told me. "Can you have Jason and Frasier come up in case I need them?"

I smiled. "In case they decide to go all 'grr'?"

"Yeah."

"Sure." When Brenda followed after Rafe, I glanced to where the guys were and gestured toward the stairs. "Can you go make sure the guys don't hover? Brenda wants to clean her up and stuff and they may not let her. You know what it's like when someone is injured and people want to hover?" I said pointedly.

Jason smiled and kissed my cheek. "Okay."

I watched them go upstairs, thankful that we could be here to help Brenda when she needed it. She'd done so much for me, I was glad I finally had a chance to do something for her.

Graham showed up a few minutes later and I showed him upstairs. I was glad to see that the guys were in the hall, but Brenda must have been in with Samantha. I knocked on the door and called out to my sister. When she told me to come in, I opened the door a little. "Graham's here," I told her.

"Please bring him in," she said, relief written on her face.

I moved back so the mage could come in and look anxiously toward the bed. Samantha was dressed in a modest nightgown and she'd been cleaned up, but her face was starting to swell where the bastard had beaten her. She didn't look good.

"How's she doing?" I asked softly. Something about seeing her laying there so pale saddened me, even though I'd never seen the girl before tonight.

"She's really sore," Brenda replied, watching Graham walk over to the bed. "There might be something broken but I cleaned her up as best I could."

"Do you mind if I?" Graham asked, gesturing toward the girl. When Brenda nodded, he sat down on the edge of the bed and placed a hand on her forehead. He closed his eyes and concentrated for a long moment.

"She has a couple of cracked ribs," he said finally as he moved his hand away, "and one of the bones in her right arm is broken. She also has a lot of bruises and so forth, but we can take care of that here. Would you mind leaving us alone for just a moment? It's easier."

She looked at Samantha anxiously. "That's fine." I could tell she didn't want leave her with Graham, but she walked to the door and we left him to do what he needed to.

I leaned back against the closed door in case any of the overprotective guys decided they needed to go inside. Jason walked over to me and I slid my arm around his waist. We could hear low chanting through the door for a while, then it got real quiet. A few minutes later we could hear Samantha talking quietly with Graham.

Brenda tried to be patient, I know she did, but she couldn't take it for very long. Jason and I moved out of the way and she knocked on the door. Jason, Frasier and I watched them go in and I could see through the door that the girl looked much better. I couldn't explain the relief that filled me.

"Shall we go downstairs?" I asked them. I needed to call Micky and Ford to let them know what was going on.

That night, I dreamed.

THESE DREAMS

And I never wonder where you went

I only wonder why...

Caroline - Concrete Blonde

Sobs shook me as I slipped on my nice black dress, but deep in some part of my mind I was glad. Lizzy had been hooked up to the life support for nearly a week. She hadn't been alive really, the machines had merely made her body go through the process of living.

Even Malcolm and I couldn't save her with our magic, she'd been hurt too badly. The house the two of them were renting had blown up due to a gas leak. Nobody was really sure how she had survived the explosion itself, but she had.

I sat down hard on my bed, wracked by renewed sobs. Why that exact day? She'd been with me and Marcus and Malcolm downtown, but had left us there saying that she didn't feel well. She had opened a gateway home rather than let one of us drive her.

The memory made me look up at my camera case. I had been finishing a roll of film for school by taking some pictures of the four of us that day. I didn't want to think about those pictures right now.

I finished getting dressed and went downstairs. I'd told Marcus to meet me at the funeral home, and I was running late. Papa was sitting in his chair when I came down, but I didn't plan on talking to him. He'd been acting funny this week, and I knew I was in no shape to argue with him.

As I walked by the living room he called out to me. "I thought I told you, you weren't allowed to go to that tramp's funeral."

I tried to ignore him but his next statement stopped me cold.

"She deserved to die Tina."

"She was my friend!" I shouted before I can stop myself. "And who are you to say she deserved to die?" Tears welled up in my eyes again. I expected Papa to be mad at my outburst, but instead he just walked calmly over to me.

"She was evil. Evil needs to be punished."

I was surprised at his calm. What if I had been with her? I could have been killed too, but Papa didn't seem to realize that. He knew I was going to be with them all that day, we'd argued about it before I left. Papa still thought they were all bad people.

I was about to say something when the phone rang. Papa answered it and when I realized that it wasn't for me, I turned and walked out the door.

Marcus was waiting outside the funeral home when I pulled up and we went inside together. I gave Malcolm a hug as soon as I saw him before I went on to speak to some of the other mourners. After thirty minutes or so I heard Malcolm's voice in my mind.

What are you thinking about Tina? he asked me. There is something else in there.

Nothing, I replied, but I knew I'd been thinking about what Papa had said before I left the house.

What is going on? Malcolm demanded. Is it your father?

I knew he sometimes skimmed surface thoughts so I tried to think about something else, anything else.

You told him where we were going? His tone in my head was almost accusing. Surely he couldn't think Papa had anything to do with Lizzy's death, he'd just been trying to look out for me. Besides, the police had said the explosion was caused by a gas leak.

I looked up to meet Malcolm's eyes from across the room. He had an angry look on his face and I knew he was having a hard time controlling his rage.

Malcolm I— I began to send to him, but he cut me off with a powerful scream inside of my mind. I felt the world spin as I landed hard on the floor. Marcus was by my side before I even knew what had happened, holding me. I pushed up to my knees and looked around, but Malcolm was no where to be seen.

"He's gone," Marcus told me softly. "He used some power and just vanished. Come on. Let's get you out of here." He led me out of the room but at the doorway I stopped to take one last look back at the casket holding my friend.

When I woke up, I remembered what I'd been dreaming about. That was strange in and of itself, I don't usually remember my dreams, but even stranger was the fact that I actually remembered it. I could lay there in my bed in Salem and name several places in Helena that the four of us had hung out, Marcus, Lizzy, Malcolm and me. And this wasn't the first dream I'd had of the four of them that I'd woke up remembering.

I felt such a sense of mourning from this dream, as if I'd lost not one but two of my best friends. For some reason, Malcolm's rage toward me had cut to the bone. He wasn't my boyfriend, he was Lizzy's. What was he to me? And why had he seemed so familiar, as if I'd seen him since my embrace?

It was nearly six thirty and I didn't have time to worry about my dream. I had to go to the chantry now or I'd be late, and I didn't want to make Elvira angry with anything close to noncompliance with the schedule Micky had set up for me. Within minutes, Jason, Frasier and I were on our way.

When we got home an hour or so before dawn, I excused myself to find Brenda working in her study downstairs. "I'm glad I caught you," I said softly. Alone was what I meant. "Got a minute?"

She looked up and smiled. "Yeah."

"I'm ah..." How could I say this? "This is really weird."

"Sit down," she told me, setting aside the paper she'd been reading.

I sat. "You know when Robert was here I was having dreams about stuff?" I'd talked to her a little about it.

"Uh-huh."

"Well I'm having dreams," I told her. "Dreams about... things."

"Like what?"

"Well, like...." Come on, Chris, just spit it out. "Okay, there was this guy and he was, you know, the leather, the bike."

"Luke?"

Just hearing his name made my heart jump. "No, no," I said quickly. "His name was Marcus and he, uh, Papa did not like him. And if this was a memory, then we dated, you know? But I don't know that much about dream theory, how much do you know about it?"

She shook her head. "Nothing."

"It's just really strange. And there's this other guy, you know." This was the one that was really bothering me. "I had one today and it was kinda weird because there was this guy who looked very familiar to me but I don't know why. It's like I've seen him since my embrace, but I can't really place him. He was my best friend's boyfriend."

"Okay," she said slowly. I could tell she was trying to understand, but how could she when I didn't?

"And I think that Papa had something to do with her death." I said it in a rush to get it out, but I didn't feel any better after I did.

"Well, your dad was a hunter, right?" she said logically. "Was there something about her? I mean he doesn't appear to be the kind of man that would just—"

"No, not murder a person off the street," I assured her. At least, I didn't think he was like that. "She was, I believe, a mage, but she was—we were—" Breathe, Chris. "Okay, I don't remember too much about it, just bits and pieces, but it seems like we were all on the town one day and she didn't feel good so she went home and there was a gas explosion."

"Oh, my God," Brenda exclaimed.

"And, um, she was on life support for a week." It was so hard to talk about it, it had seemed so real, like it had just happened yesterday. "So I don't know if it a dream or a memory coming back."

"Well, how has it been working for Cormac?" she asked.

"Well," I said with a dry laugh, "I guess I'd have to ask, wouldn't I?" He was out of town and not due back for another week.

"Why don't you call him and see what he says?" she asked with a smile. "He's been getting his memories back, from what I understand."

"Yeah, from dreams." Duh. I had to grin too. "I guess I didn't want to bother him, I know he's busy."

"I'm sorry I couldn't be of much help, you know I'd do whatever I could."

I knew she would. "I just thought maybe I could talk to you about it."

"Of course you can talk to me," she told me earnestly.

"I just meant that sometimes talking to someone helps me to think things out," I corrected.

"Is there anything else about it that unsettles you?" she asked softly. "I mean, not like there isn't enough there all ready."

"Yeah, it's hard to explain, you know?" And I knew I wasn't doing a very good job of it. "It's just—I don't know how to explain this. I'll talk to Cormac when he gets back." That seemed like the best idea, there wasn't a real rush was there? My memories had waited for seven years, they could wait a bit longer. "Thanks for listening, Bren."

I went upstairs and went to bed with Jason holding me tight. I hoped his arms would keep the nightmares away. They didn't.

NIGHTMARES

Remember walking in the rain?

I'm walking there still

Days and Days - Concrete Blonde

I was walking home one night after work in the rain wondering why it had to rain the week my car was in the shop. I hated working late at the paper, but I knew that I had to since the Monday edition always went to press early.

The streets were dark, but that only made sense, it was night and still raining. I had to laugh a little at my paranoia.

About halfway home I heard the sounds of a fight coming from the next block over. I hurried up the street to peek around the corner, but when I got there I was bowled over by someone running the other way. I got back to my feet quickly, but the other person was quicker.

"Hello, Tina," I heard a familiar voice say. "Come to kill me yourself?"

I looked up into Malcolm's cold blue eyes only a few feet away. "M-Malcolm?" I could hardly recognize him, he looked decades older than he had the last time I'd seen him, at Lizzy's funeral. He'd always worn black, but now his clothes looked ancient. "I... but you don't..."

My words were cut off as he swung at me with a knife I didn't see him pull. Somehow I got my arm up in time to protect my face and throat, but a little too slow to avoid the blow altogether. The blade embedded in my left forearm.

I screamed when Malcolm tried to pull it free, but the edge was caught on the bones in my arm. I looked down and recognized the weapon; it was Lizzy's ceremonial dagger. I stumbled backwards pulling the dagger free from his hand and caught myself on the wall of the building behind me. I could hear voices and running feet coming toward us as Malcolm looked in that direction, then back at me.

"Next time, child, you won't have your father's followers to save you." With a flourish of his cloak, he vanished.

I fell to the ground as the group of men reached me. I recognized some of them from my father's church, but darkness overtook me and I lost consciousness....

"Tina, are you awake dear?" I heard Papa's soothing voice as I opened my eyes.

I was in a hospital room. I realized that my head hurt and when I brought my arm up to cover my eyes I could see that it was covered in gauze bandages. I realized that my arm hurt much worse than my head.

My voice sounded raspy and my throat felt unused, but somehow I managed to speak. "What happened?"

"You were attacked, dear."

Malcolm; I remembered Malcolm, and the dagger.

"You hit your head pretty hard on the way down. You've been asleep for over two days."

I started to cry and Papa sat down on the bed next to me.

"Rest now. You've been through a lot."

Despite having slept so long, I suddenly felt tired and closed my eyes.

I was released from the hospital two days later, but the doctor told me to take another week off from work. After dinner that night, I confronted my father on what Malcolm had said about Papa's 'followers'.

"You should know what I preach nearly as well as I do," he told me. "Evil must be punished, wherever it lays. Whatever form it takes." His voice never changed, it sounded like he was talking about the weather.

Damn him, how could he talk about killing that calmly? Before I could ask him, he said something that caught me off guard.

"I called a friend of mine from Berkley. You start school there this fall." Papa had been pushing me for some time to go to college, but I didn't want to go.

"Papa, no! I have a good job here."

"Do not argue with me, daughter!" His voice had taken an edge that told me there would be no changing his mind.

I stopped myself from protesting again. If Papa were somehow involved with people getting killed, then I'd rather be away from him anyway. Besides, now that I knew Malcolm was alive and wanted me dead, maybe it would be best to get away. There was safety in numbers, right? This town held so many bad memories for me anyway, so many deaths. And Berkley did have one of the best Photojournalism programs in the western United States.

I woke instantly as the sun went down, the dream still lingering in my mind. Marcus hadn't been in this dream, and I was pretty sure I knew why. On the night Malcolm had attacked me Marcus was already dead.

I could feel Jason moving next to me, but I didn't say anything. He switched on the bedside lamp and I lifted my left arm. There on my underside of my forearm was a scar, one that was the right size and shape to match the wound I'd taken in my dream. But it wasn't really a dream, was it? It was a memory.

Malcolm hated me so much that he'd risked discovery to attack me. I shivered in the warmth of my bedroom, wondering just how far he'd taken his revenge.

For a moment the image of Lord Malcolm from Ramadan flashed through my mind, but I pushed it away. The two Malcolm's couldn't have been the same person, that was just too much of a coincidence to believe.

Perhaps I didn't want to face the truth.

MEMORIES

When your breathing is the wind
And your crying is the rain
Well I know you will remember
Lullaby - Concrete Blonde

A few nights later my duties took me to Boston where I had to pick up two bodies that Cormac needed cleaned up. One was Prudence, who had been found and staked by Eliza, and the other was a man from St. Stephen's who'd been in the wrong place at the wrong time.

I spent a few minutes talking to Cormac about Brenda, and trying to get their relationship back on an even keel. I had no idea what had started the animosity between them, but since they were both my siblings, I did my best to put an end to it.

When we had that settled as much as we were going to, I stood back and looked at my newfound brother. I tried not to be too obvious about studying him, but I don't know how well I did concealing it. "If I'm getting too personal, just let me know," I began softly. "But what's going on between you and the girl?"

"Christina, please," he said patiently. "Her name is Eliza."

There was something in the way he said her name that was telling, but I wasn't going to point that out to him. "Eliza."

"When I figure it out, I'll let you know," he said dryly.

"Has she figured it out?"

"I don't know."

My brother Cormac, ever the font of information. "Where is... Eliza?"

"Ireland."

That surprised me. "What is she doing there?"

"Waiting for me," he said simply.

"Oh." I wondered how long she'd wait and what would happen to him when he got there. She wasn't exactly known for her regard of Kindred, I'd been asking around. "I know that she works for St. Stephens. Things should get interesting when you return to Salem."

"Yes," he agreed. "I am trying to figure out how to break the contract without..."

"Anyone getting killed or embraced," I finished for him.

He almost smiled. "Yes."

"Well, I should go," I told him as I stood to leave. I had a couple of bodies to take care of.

"Christina, just a moment." He picked up his bag and pulled out the book that had the secret compartment. He opened the compartment and dug through the papers inside, then pulled out a gold bracelet and held it out to me.

"What is that?" I asked softly.

"Yours."

I walked slowly across the room and took it from him. It was a charm bracelet, and most of the charms had pictures of Robert and me on them at various ages in our young lives. There were also two gold silhouettes with dates on them. I assumed it was our birth dates; mine was in January.

"Where did you get this?" I demanded softly.

"From Dougal."

I looked at him in surprise. "I thought Dougal was dead." Dougal Galloway was the Kindred who had made both Cormac and I vampires. I'd been left alone in Vegas to fend for myself, but Cormac had stayed with his sire for many years.

"He left it for me in his things," Cormac explained.

Dougal had left things for Cormac to find. I let the impact of that thought sink in before I let myself hope he had left something more for me. "Was there anything else?"

"Not for you," he told me kindly.

I tried not to be hurt by that, but I couldn't help how I felt. The Tremere who had embraced me hadn't thought enough to leave even a short note for me. That really shouldn't have surprised me, he'd cared so little that he'd abandoned me right after my embrace.

It was hard not to envy Cormac the relationship he'd had with his sire. Logically I knew that Cormac hadn't even known I existed until a month ago. It wasn't his fault Dougal had thought so little of me and I refused to let my jealousy come between us.

I shrugged off the pain I felt and looked at the bracelet. "Have you done the Spirit's Touch on this?"

"No, I did not want to intrude on memories that weren't mine." When I shot him a skeptical look, he added, "If I don't have to."

I cupped the bracelet in my hand and closed my eyes. It took just a moment to concentrate like I'd been practicing and an instant later the snapshot-like visions hit me.

Cormac was standing in a small bedroom holding an envelope and taking the bracelet from it. I could see a girl standing a few feet away watching him intently.

I was laying on a lace-covered canopied bed with Piston standing over me. He was looking down at the bracelet that was draped across his hand.

Robert was dressed all in black, looking very handsome and very sad. His hand was held out toward a much younger me, and I was reaching for the bracelet in his hand. Behind him I could see a casket being lowered into the ground.

I stumbled back into a chair and sat down hard. Oh, I'd had visions from objects before, I'd been practicing, but this was definitely different. These visions seemed to have sparked memories of my past.

Robert had given me the bracelet because mom had wanted me to have it. We had been standing by the grave at our mother's funeral and both of us were trying very hard not to cry. I'd put it on and worn it every day after that.

Also, I could remember Piston picking up the bracelet from the bed in that room in Las Vegas. He'd looked at it for a long time and I remember not being able to move or talk.

"What did you see?" Cormac asked softly.

"I saw you take it from an envelope," I said slowly, fighting to remember more, but with the headache I felt coming on I knew it would be impossible.

"Yes, that would be in Paris." He was watching me closely.

"I saw Robert give it to me at my mother's funeral," I added softly.

I looked down at the bracelet, wondering if my memories of Piston could be right. I didn't remember seeing any one else in the room. If that was a memory of my embrace, where the hell was Dougal?

"I had this dream while we were at the holding," I told him softly. "It was so real. I was in a bedroom with dozens of lit candles. There was a canopied bed with a lace coverlet that I was laying on. There was a man with me, and he fed me from a chalice. It had jewels on it." I knew I was rambling, but I couldn't stop. I looked over at Cormac, more than a little confused.

"I talked to Antonio about it," I continued in a hushed voice, "and until the whole Dougal thing came up, we thought that Kindred had embraced me. Antonio recognized him from my description; he was Piston, a Kindred in Vegas that was killed a few years ago. Just now I saw that room again, and Piston. He was holding the bracelet and standing next to the bed. I didn't see anyone else."

I looked back down at the bracelet and I could see that room so clearly it was almost like I was standing in it. "It's so weird because the ritual Brenda did proved that Dougal embraced me. What did Dougal look like?"

The description he gave me rang a bell and I frowned thoughtfully. "He sounds kind of familiar for some reason. Did you guys ever come to Vegas? Do you have a picture of him?"

"The only time I know of that Dougal went to Vegas was to embrace you," he told me. "I was not on that mission."

He took a photograph from his pack and handed it to me. Dougal was tall and solidly built with light brown hair and blue eyes. I thought that he looked like a favorite uncle would, if I could remember having a favorite uncle. I sat looking down at it for a few minutes before I finally remembered that I'd seen him before in the Vegas chantry.

"I've seen him before," I told Cormac softly. "He was in Vegas once, a long time ago. I talked to him for a few minutes while he was waiting for Rebecca to find something in the library."

He took a step closer to me. "When was this?"

I remembered him coming into the chantry library with Rebecca. He'd sat and talked to me while she'd looked for something. "About a year after my embrace give or take a few months," I murmured. "I was studying in the Chantry and they came in. We didn't talk for very long."

"Did he say what he was doing?" Cormac asked intently. "Where he was going?"

"Not really," I told him. "Like I said, we didn't talk very long and it was six years ago. My memory isn't as good as yours, I don't really remember what was said." Cormac had a phenomenal memory, it matched Luke's, I swear. "He did say that he lived with his childe, I assume that's you." I don't know what it was that made me feel worse, thinking about Luke, or knowing that Dougal hadn't cared enough about me to keep me with him as he had Cormac.

"Yes," he replied, his voice sad. "That was me. So, who is this Piston you were telling me of?"

I shrugged. "I never met him, but Antonio seemed to recognize my description of him from my dream. He was in the room when I was embraced, but I don't remember seeing anyone else. Antonio and Michael killed Piston a few years ago." I added that last almost as an afterthought.

"For what?"

"According to my—" I was going to say 'sire', but I wasn't sure if Cormac would take offense, "Antonio he had stolen some ancient texts from the chantry and taken off to Mexico."

"Which texts?"

"I didn't actually ask. Why?" He seemed a little inquisitive about this whole thing.

"Just curious," he replied. "You said Michael killed him?"

I wasn't sure about that. "It was one of them. I think they were in Mexico, and I believe Antonio was injured in this incident. You'd have to ask him about more details."

"Hmmm. Were there any other repercussions?"

"I don't think so." I looked away and stood up. "Are you going to Ireland? You said th-Eliza was waiting for you." I'd almost called her 'the girl' again.

"Yes, she should be there already. May I ask you something Chris?" When I nodded, he said, "I know that your sis-Brenda acts as a 'travel agent' of sorts for the clan, and also as an enforcer. Have you, umm, acquired a position like that as well?"

"Travel agent? No," I told him. "If I want to go somewhere I call Brenda. So far I am playing enforcer with Micky, though. Why, you need somebody... eliminated?" I smiled a little, finally feeling a bit more like myself.

He grinned and it changed the whole look of his face. "No, not at the moment," he assured me. "I just need to find a way to, um, get back in the good graces with the PTB."

The Powers That Be. "Kinda pissed Ford off, did you?" I'd heard about that. He'd actually hung up on the Regent. "Well, he must like you or you'd be dead...er by now. Actually, the stories I'm hearing about Eliza make me wonder just how much he likes her. He seems to have quite a bit of patience with her for an elder." Usually they just had people killed that pulled anything near what Eliza had done over the years.

"Oh?" He sounded very interested. "What have you heard?"

"Not a whole lot, actually," I admitted ruefully. "Just that she has this habit of staking her contacts and there's a rumor that she was somehow involved with a Regent's death in Vermont, though I tend to think that's something Ford wouldn't have overlooked. I've been asking some questions."

"I'll ask her about that," he murmured. "Exactly what questions have you been asking?"

"I've been trying to be discreet, so I haven't actually been asking specific questions," I told him. "I've just been kinda feeling out what people have to say about her. She really hasn't been in Salem that long, just a couple of months. I heard she helped Corrine move here in late May or early June, just before the Regent was killed."

"As I said, I may ask her about the Regent. You may want to cease with the questions though." He gave me a level look. "They could be hazardous to Ford's health, and that would lead to a shit-load of problems."

"From what I understand about her contract, it prohibits questions about her past before she signed it, not afterwards," I reminded him. "But I agree, we wouldn't want anything to happen to Ford, Elvira would be livid." That was putting it mildly, Elvira thought very highly of her sire.

"Yes, She would be very upset," he agreed with a glance at his watch. "About that 'job'."

I frowned. "Which job?"

He smiled slightly. "Mine. You remember, getting back on the good side of the PTBs?"

"Yeah. Got any ideas? Anything I can help you with?" He was my brother, after all. Granted, I didn't know him all that well, but blood was blood. Plus, he was Tremere, and we tend to stick together.

"Well, did you say you were helping out with security?"

"Yeah, but I don't see how that will help you get back in Ford's good graces."

"It may well prove my loyalties truly lie with the Clan," he told me. "At least to Ford."

It was my turn to smile. "Are you saying your true loyalties don't lie with the clan? Maybe they lie elsewhere?" Like with Eliza, or Corrine, his daughter.

"No," he assured me. "I am trying to prove that they do lie with the clan to Ford and the prince."

I don't know why, but his answer disappointed me a little. Which was strange because being Tremere, I knew the clan was supposed to come first, always. Not that it always did with me. "Okay, what do you have in mind?"

He shook his head and put a hand on his forehead. "Do I have to spell it out for you?"

"I'm thinking yes."

"Security," he told me. "You want me to get along with Brenda, what better way than for us to work together some more?"

He wasn't playing fair. "You want to work security."

"And it would give us a chance to get to know each other better," he added.

"Which would be a plus," I admitted.

"And prove myself to the clan."

"Although, you and Brenda with large guns together in the same room," I said dryly. "I'm afraid."

"We've had large guns together in the same room several times," he reminded me with a smile. "They've never been pointed at each other."

I had to laugh. "Just at me." Not that Brenda had meant to shoot me, it had just happened.

"I've never pointed a gun at you," he said firmly.

"I'll see what I can do," I told him, ignoring that comment. "I'll talk to Micky." We were getting along pretty good, even though he was keeping me busy every minute of every night. In fact, he was probably wondering just where I was right about now.

"How's his car running?" Cormac asked dryly.

"Fine," I said, trying not to laugh again. "He's still confused as to how he has two sets of keys that are identical." We'd taken the other Micky's car in the alternate Salem and Cormac had brought his keys with him to our world.

"You were there," he reminded me.

I smiled. "That doesn't mean I told him."

He rolled his eyes and looked down at his watch. "Well, I believe Jax should be landing any time soon and I should be on my way."

I wondered if Jason had waited by the car like I'd asked or if he was off scouting the area. "And I have a package to deliver."

Cormac chuckled and we both headed for the door

"It's really weird how everything has turned out," I murmured.

He looked down at me. "How so?"

"Well, you know," I said as we walked toward the stairs. "Us being related, and Jason coming back ugly."

He shrugged. "Chalk it up to some divine interference."

I smiled a little at the idea. "Do you believe in destiny, Cormac?"

He didn't answer, and when I looked at him he seemed to have spaced out a little. "Ah, what was the question?" he murmured.

"Do you believe in destiny?" I repeated.

"I'm not sure," he said slowly.

"It's just really strange how things worked out," I told him. "Like fate, you know?"

When it was clear he wasn't really listening, I asked him if there were a problem. He said no, but I could tell there was something.

"Okay, you just seem out in the twilight zone a little bit," I murmured.

"I've got a lot to think about." He opened the door to the street for me and we walked toward the van.

"So you're going to Ireland," I said softly, "and you've got another week."

"Yes."

"I'll talk to Micky and see if I can make arrangements by the time you get back." That should be plenty of time to work something out.

"Say goodnight to the boys," he told me, a hint of humor in his voice.

I laughed and looked toward the van where my men were waiting for me. "Yeah, it's been interesting if nothing else."

He glanced at the van, then looked down at me sternly. "Don't remove the stake."

We took the bodies to the chantry and Micky insisted I spend several hours studying Latin. Apparently it wouldn't do for any Tremere in Salem not to speak it fluently, and since I didn't know more than a few phrases, he was determined I learn.

I fell asleep that night remembering Robert and our mother's funeral.

MAGIC AND DUTY

No I don't wonder why
I wonder what he thought it would get us
Tomorrow, Wendy - Concrete Blonde

I was trying to straighten the hem of my dress as I came down the stairs, carrying my shoes in one hand and my purse in the other. When I reached the bottom, I leaned on the banister pole for support as I slip the shoes on.

Most of the time I liked the color black, but I found it hard to like anything the last few days.

As I headed for the door, my father came up behind me. "Just where do you think you're going?" he bellowed angrily.

"I'm going to the funeral," I replied in a hard voice without turning around. "And you can't stop me, Papa."

"You will do as I say!" he shouted as he took hold of my arm.

I tried to break free, but he had a firm grip and he was stronger than me.

"Haven't you learned to stay away from those people yet? How many more of them have to get themselves killed before you realize how evil they are?"

If only Papa would accept the abilities I'd been developing. I really was getting good. I was almost as good as Lizzy had been. But I hadn't been able to concentrate since...

I broke into tears again just thinking about Lizzy lying there in that hospital bed for a week before she died. Then Malcolm had disappeared, and now Marcus was dead too. My legs gave out and I would have fallen to the floor but my father caught me.

"Calm down, dear," he said, his voice softer and more kind than I'd heard it in a long time. I stopped sobbing, although the tears were still running down my face.

"Come on, Tina, let's get you back upstairs." He helped me to my feet and led me back up to my room, holding me close all the way. I laid down on the bed and tried to calm myself some more, but I couldn't stop crying completely and I felt very confused.

Papa acted so lovingly today, but during the last month he'd been so hard. It was almost as if he hadn't been surprised when Lizzy had died. I pushed those thoughts from my mind as I tried to get comfortable.

Some time later I got up and drew myself a hot bath. As I relaxed in the warm water, I finally started to drift off to sleep for the first time in what felt like days.

Tina, I heard Malcolm say in my mind, but I wasn't sure if I was dreaming or not. Tina, we missed you today. Marcus looked so peaceful, so happy that he wasn't here anymore. Then his voice changed, becoming harder, filled with hate.

He understood why he died. I explained it to him before I broke his fucking neck.

I sat bolt upright in the bathtub on the edge of screaming, but I quickly realized that I had been sleeping. It had only been a horrible dream. As I laid back, Malcolm's voice came to me once again, still filled with hate.

You killed my love. I killed yours. And he was gone.

I woke up with tears in my eyes, not wanting to remember what I'd just dreamed. Of course it didn't matter what I wanted, I remembered it anyway. Malcolm had killed Marcus because Papa had murdered Lizzy.

The two guys really hadn't been that close, but it was still a shock to me that Malcolm had killed Marcus. Granted, they weren't exactly the closest friends, but they had gotten along well.

If this was what it was like to have memories, I could live without them.

Almost a week later, Micky and I were waiting in the drawing room of the chantry for Cormac to arrive.

"You realize that we have to be rough with him," The prince's favorite childe said softly.

I smiled, thinking how rough they'd been with me. "I know."

"The clan must weed out those who cannot handle the discipline," he added.

"Oh, I think he can handle it," I assured him. Cormac had always seemed so serious and disciplined that when I'd heard he'd hung up on Ford, I almost couldn't believe it. "I'm sure he'll prove himself pretty quickly."

"I hope so," he replied. "I met him when he was here a couple of years ago and I liked him."

"I like him too," I admitted. Sure, he wasn't the warmest person, but he was someone I knew I could count on. He kept a clear head in a crisis and sometimes that was the only thing that mattered.

We heard voices in the hall and I stood up as the door opened. Cormac came in and I went to greet him. "Cormac, it's good to see you again," I said warmly. I wasn't quite sure if I should hug him, but I didn't think it was a good idea.

"How have you been?" he asked me.

"Really good," I said honestly. "We've been working on the wedding plans and working with Micky a lot. So how is Eliza?"

"She is well," he replied. "She is returning to her duties at St. Stephen's for the moment. Did you get the picture?"

"Yes, yes I did and I appreciate you sending that on to me." He'd sent me a photograph that he'd found in Dougal's grimoire, one of me and three other people I didn't recognize. It had been a surprise, but a good one.

"Did you remember who they were?"

Abruptly I remembered Micky sitting behind me. "I got some information, but we'll talk about it later."

"Of course."

"Now if you gentlemen will excuse me," I said, glancing at Micky to see his nod. I looked back to Cormac. "I wanted to be here when you came but I know that Micky some business to talk to you about."

"Of course," he repeated. He laid a hand on my shoulder for a moment and I smiled at him. I'm sure it was as close to a hug as Cormac ever got.

I rejoined Jason and Frasier in the hall and we went on about our duties. I hoped that I'd be able to spend more time with Cormac soon.

A few nights later I dreamed of the past again.

I was sitting under a tree at a local city park, the chill wind of early spring starting to blow hard around me. I didn't notice the cold because I had Marcus' leather jacket. If I tried I could smell his cologne on the collar.

I gave myself a mental shake to free my mind of him. I had more important things to be doing than dreaming of my boyfriend.

When I was going through the attic a few days before I had found one of Robert's books. I was sitting in the park doing my best to understand it. Most of the passages were, while complex at first, comprehensible after some thought. All but the one that appeared to be about some other type of supernatural creature's abilities, something called Hemeomancy.

After a half an hour or so I 'felt' something magical behind me. Without turning, I knew Malcolm was standing behind me. He didn't know how fast I'd been advancing and I liked the look he on his face when he thought he'd showed me some new trick, one I'd already learned.

Just as he was about to lay a hand on my shoulder, I greeted him, startling him in the process.

"Touch not lest ye be touched," I said in my best mocking voice.

Malcolm laughed and the sound soon filled the near empty park. After he calmed down and took a seat next to me, I pushed the book toward him.

"Help me out, would you?" I asked him. Maybe he would be able to make sense of the passages that confused me.

He took the book and studied it. He became very interested in whatever it was that he was reading, and it took me actually bumping him to tear him away from the text.

"What? Oh, this is... some heavy shit, Tina. Have you been able to do anything with this?" I could tell that he was very intent on what he had read.

"No," I replied. "I just found the book a few days ago."

"I don't even know if this is something I should be messing with, but I'd like to read it more closely. Would you mind?" he asked, gesturing toward his bag.

"Sure," I shrugged. Malcolm would probably be able to understand it better than I could. Besides most of the book dealt with Robert's tradition, not mine.

"See you then," I told him as I stood up to walk home.

I felt Malcolm open a portal as he started to sing. "There's a crack in the mirror and a blood stain on the bed..."

The instant I woke I knew several things. The events in this dream happened after the first one I'd had like it almost a month ago, but before Marcus and I had been seeing each other a year. Malcolm had been my mentor then, and I trusted him to teach me what every good Verbena should know.

Verbena; I was Verbena. Finally a concrete memory I could point to and say what I'd been before my embrace.

I knew the song too, but I couldn't remember what it was. I did know that for some reason Malcolm had loved it.

Glancing at the clock I saw that I didn't really have time to dwell in the past. I had to get dressed and be at the Chantry by seven and if I didn't want to be late I had to move quickly.

The night before we were to fly to Austria for the wedding, Cormac brought his Eliza home to the Bathori Mansion. I'd heard that he'd managed to renegotiate her contract and he'd spent the last three nights with her, forming the blood bond that made her his ghoul.

They'd spent most of the night with Brenda and Micky at the chantry. One of the conditions of her new contract was that she submit to testing that would determine her physical prowess and well being. Dhampyr are rare and it turned out that she was one, so Ford was anxious to find out more about her.

She seemed a little on edge, almost as if she expected one of us to bite her. When Cormac was close to her it seemed to help somewhat, but all in all she didn't look very happy to be staying with us.

Somehow during the evening I caught her alone.

"Eliza," I said softly to get her attention.

She looked at me warily but didn't say anything.

"Does Cormac know how you feel about staying here?"

"I never said I didn't want to stay here," she replied defensively.

"No, but it's quite obvious," I told her gently. "Have you told him you'd rather be elsewhere?"

By the look on her face, she wasn't going to be sharing her true feelings with me any time soon. "He's my... master," she said, and I thought she was going to choke on the word. "Where he goes, I go."

"Entreat me not to leave thee," I murmured softly, quoting one of the few verses of the Bible I could remember, "or to return from following after thee. For whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge."

"Thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God," she continued with a grim smile. "Where thou diest, will I die and there will I be buried. The Lord do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me."

Something of my surprise must have shown on my face because she added, "You can't live in the Society and not read the Bible."

"No, I suppose not," I agreed. "I met you in the other world, you know."

She looked at me in surprise. "You did?"

"Yes. You were very anxious to get your husband back," I told her.

"I can imagine," she murmured. "If you will excuse me, I think Cormac needs me."

I let her go wondering if she would ever consider me her friend.

LORD MALCOLM

Love is the kisser you thought

Was your friend

The Beast - Concrete Blonde

Early the next night I had an opportunity to talk to Cormac about my dreams. We discussed his experiences for a few minutes, about how they seemed to be prompted in some way by something he'd seen, or someone he'd talked to. I couldn't figure out what was jogging my memories, but I did remember seeing a dress similar to the one I'd worn to Lizzy's funeral one night when Brenda and I were out shopping.

He offered to take my duties for the rest of the night and because I was tired I accepted. I went back to the mansion where I sat alone in the living room with pictures that Robert had given me, and the one Cormac had sent to me from Ireland.

Would I ever remember what had become of Malcolm? Had he finally forgiven me, or had he hated me until I'd disappeared seven years ago? I also had to wonder if he'd killed anyone else I'd loved.

It made me sad just thinking about it. He'd been my mentor after all, my friend. We'd tried to save Lizzy together, how could he have blamed me for her death?

I wanted to call Papa and ask him about these things, but I'd promised Robert that I'd stay away from our father for a while longer. That was probably a good idea anyway. Knowing what I now knew about Papa's part in Robert's death, and my mother's, it was likely that I'd want to kill him on site.

I leaned my head back on the chair and closed my eyes, hoping that if I just thought about it I could remember what had happened to Malcolm. The only thing it got me was a major headache.

I was standing in a funeral home that somehow seemed familiar to me, but I couldn't remember ever being there before. I was wearing a proper black dress that filled me with sadness just looking at it, but it seemed comforting at the same time. I took a moment to gather my courage before I approached the casket at the front of the room. When I reached it, the body inside was as familiar to me as my own face.

Though they did the best job they could making him look appropriate, I could still tell where Marcus' neck was broken. As I laid the single rose I carried on his chest, I felt someone behind me. I knew it is Papa before he spoke.

"Come child. It's time to go," I heard him declare. I turned to face him, sadness filling engulfing my soul. Papa was dressed in his Priest's robes, but when I looked up into his face I saw that he was glaring at me with hatred. As I opened my mouth to speak, his body shifted to that of my mentor, and I realized that I was standing next to a dumpster in an alley in Las Vegas. It was the same alley I'd woke up in seven years ago with no memories of my mortal life.

"Malcolm?" I gasped. I hadn't seen him since he disappeared at Lizzy's funeral. As he opened his mouth to reply, his visage shifted ever so slightly. My hands clenched when I realized who was standing in front of me. Lord Malcolm threw his head back and laughed, the sound sending a shudder down my spine. I took a step towards him, as the sound echoed down the alley, and he held up his hand, palm out.

"Hold, child," he said, but his voice was not his own.

When I looked up again the man that Cormac had told me was Dougal Galloway was standing before me. His image changed almost as soon as I realized who he was, morphing into the Kindred from my dreams. The man I knew as Piston leered at me, holding the jewel encrusted goblet as he took a step forward. I looked away in fear at what he would do only to hear Antonio's soothing voice.

"What is wrong childe?"

I opened my eyes to see his loving face looking back at me. I was relieved to see him, but the sound of movement behind me caught my attention. I turned back to see that I was in the funeral home again and Marcus was sitting up in the casket, his lips parting to reveal bloodstained teeth.

I sat bolt upright in the chair with a scream on my lips, aware that I'd somehow drifted off. I couldn't quite shake the memory of Marcus's ashen face. When I closed my eyes, I could still hear him singing.

You are a vampire and now I am nothing at all.

It was time for me to admit the truth, as horrible as it was. The Malcolm who had been my mentor and the Lord Malcolm who had caused Jason's embrace and abducted Lena were one and the same.

I'd known him before my embrace, he'd been my mentor and my friend. Then it hit me; if Malcolm had hated me enough to kill Marcus, maybe Graves wasn't the reason that Jason and Lena had been taken. Maybe I was the reason behind both horrifying ordeals.

Malcolm hated me and was still trying to pay me back for what Papa had done to Lizzy. It was my fault Jason was Kindred. It was my fault Lena had been taken from the holding to Ramadan. I had hated Graves for things that I had caused.

Suddenly it made sense that the Verbena had been following Luke, Lena and I through Europe and back into the States two years ago. Malcolm was Verbena and he had strong ties within the tradition, at least he had when I'd known him.

The song from my dreams kept running through my head and I couldn't shake it. I knew the song, really knew it, but I couldn't remember ever having heard it before. Still, when Malcolm had sung it in the park I'd known the words, known what the next line was going to be.

I needed to get it out of my head. I needed blood and a good long walk to clear my mind. Then it hit me what the song was. Bloodletting, by Concrete Blonde. The Vampire Song.

I'm gonna have a drink and walk around/I've got a lot to think about.

It seemed like too much for me to take in all at once. Malcolm was Lord Malcolm and I'd known him before my embrace. I'd known him and he hated me enough to want me dead, to attack me on the street, to kill my boyfriend.

The sound of the door closing and Jason's voice startled me back to reality. We were supposed to leave for the holding at dawn and I still had to make sure that everything was packed and ready to go.

But if I closed my eyes I could still see Marcus lying there, his head laying at just enough of a wrong angle for his broken neck to be obvious.

"What's wrong?" Jason asked from the doorway.

I tried to smile. "Bad dreams," I told him. I wasn't ready to talk about this with him, not yet. "I really don't want to talk about it," I added as I stood up and walked over to him.

"Why not?" He put his arms around me and held me close.

"It was just a nightmare." It definitely had been that, I was still shaking.

"Aren't you the one who said after this whole overseas thing that we should talk it out instead of running off?" he said softly.

I looked up at him. "I'm not running anywhere."

"Running from whatever problem it is that you don't want to talk about," he replied.

I shook my head. "I'm not running anywhere, I just don't want to talk about nightmares." It wasn't like I didn't have nightmares all the time, normally I just don't remember them.

He didn't bother to answer me, just gave me a look that told me he wasn't buying it.

"You're not being fair," I protested halfheartedly.

"What do you mean I'm not being fair?" He reached up and touched the side of my face.

"It's just a nightmare," I whispered.

"That's the fourth one this week."

I looked down and took a step away from his arms. "I've been dreaming about stuff that happened before my embrace," I admitted.

"So you're remembering," he murmured. "That's good."

"I don't know if I'd call it good." Actually, considering what I'd remembered I definitely would not call it good.

"Memories can make you stronger," he told me.

"Or really freak you out," I said under my breath, "considering who I'm dreaming about."

He heard me. "Well, maybe it could be preparing you for things to come," he suggested. "Maybe the big guy is trying to tell you something."

Please, God, no. "Well, I hope that's not true," I stated in a tightly controlled voice. I didn't think I could take it if Malcolm hurt someone else I loved.

"It may not be in the same fashion, but it may be something," he said cryptically.

I walked to the window and stood pretending to look out into the night, but I watched his reflection in the glass. "I've been dreaming about Lord Malcolm."

"Oh?" he said emotionlessly. "Such as?"

He really didn't show any outward reaction to that, but I knew that even hearing the bastard's name cut him to the bone. Still, all I could do was tell him about the dreams. "Well, I told you that I've been dreaming about stuff that happened before my embrace."

"You think you knew Malcolm before?" he asked, sounding a little surprised.

"I'm pretty sure," I told him. "And I'm also pretty sure that he... doesn't like me, at all. In fact I think it's safe to say that he hates me."

Now he looked confused. "Why would he be that upset with you?"

"Because I, ah—" Shit, how could I explain this? "I killed his girlfriend. Well, I didn't do it, but he thinks it was my fault." I could feel my hands shaking just talking about it. It hurt so much to know that Papa had been a part of the group that had killed Lizzy.

Jason came over and took me into his arms again. "Do you want to talk about what happened? You want to go for a walk and talk, get outside for some air?"

When I agreed, he took my arm and led me out of the house. Thankfully Frasier was elsewhere, and he didn't see us go. We walked for a few minutes while I gathered my thoughts enough to explain everything.

"Well," I began, "you know that Papa's a hunter."

"Yes." Actually, it had been Jason who had found that information out.

"I had friends that were mages and I believe I was one too." Not that I'd been that good at it from what I could remember. I certainly hadn't been able to save Lizzy. Still, I'd been improving, and much faster than Malcolm had expected.

"Which would explain why you were embraced as you were," Jason murmured.

"Yeah." Tremere often embrace mages, they are supposed to be able to pick up on the Thaumaturgy a little easier than your average mortal. Cormac had been a mage before his embrace. "Papa got her alone and faked a gas explosion, him and his friends..."

"Boom, you're dead."

Well, that was one way of putting it. "Pretty much, but she wasn't dead. She—" I couldn't stop my voice from breaking as I remembered Lizzy lying in that hospital bed. "She was in the hospital for a week and Malcolm and I tried to save her. We couldn't—"

I stopped when Jason made a low sound in his throat and I realized that I'd been clutching his arm. I let go, immediately contrite.

"I'm sorry." It wasn't enough that I had to hurt him by what I was telling him, I had to rip into his skin too.

He pulled me into his arms and held me until I could pull myself together again. I leaned against his strength, grateful that we had found each other and worked out the problems that had plagued our relationship. I just prayed that Malcolm wouldn't be the wedge that drove us apart again.

"Malcolm found out that Papa was involved and he blamed me for it," I whispered against the fabric of Jason's shirt. "And he was right."

"Don't start talking like that," he chastised me.

"I didn't want to start this," I reminded him roughly. "If you don't want to hear it, then don't ask me what's wrong."

He pulled me closer when I would have moved away. "It's okay, let it out."

I nodded and took a breath. "About a week after Lizzy died, Malcolm killed Marcus."

"And who was that?" he asked as he led me to a bus stop bench.

"Marcus was my boyfriend," I whispered as we sat down close together. "He snapped his neck."

"And exactly what was Marcus?"

Hadn't I already said that? "My boyfriend."

"Was he part of this mage group?"

"He knew about it but he wasn't part of it." Jason took my hand and I looked down. This was the part I figured Jason would freak over, so I said it quickly. "And I was talking to Cormac the other night and he says that his memories came back usually when they were prompted by something. Like he dreamed about people that he saw, or had contact with. So if I'm dreaming about him, doesn't that mean he's around?"

I looked up in surprise when I heard the sound of wood splitting. Jason was clutching at the bench with his free hand, his face frozen.

I touched his cheek. "We're sitting on this bench, Jason," I reminded him. "If you're going to wreck it, at least let's get up first."

"What?" He came out of his daze and looked at me. "Oh."

"Now do you understand why I didn't want to talk to you about this?" I asked harshly. I hated upsetting him like this.

He took a deep breath and let it out in a sigh. "Things are always better once they get off your chest."

Oh yeah? "I don't feel any better."

"Are you done?"

Almost. This seemed harder than anything else I'd said. "Did I mention that he was my mentor?" I whispered.

Shock ran across his face. "What?"

"He's Verbena," I said with a nod. "He was my mentor."

Jason looked away. "I need a drink."

I bared my wrist for him but he just took my hand and smiled.

"We need a drink," he corrected.

"Well you know," I said, trying not to smile, "we could get Frasier drunk, and I could feed from him and you could feed from me and we could all three get drunk."

That earned me the look again. "I'm sorry, but after the year you have to go through, we'll only have one chicken left."

I had to laugh at that. He still didn't understand why the Tremere, with their reputation as blood magicians, didn't have a spell that could sever the blood bond Luke held over me.

"Well, you're smiling now," he grinned. "At least we relieved some of the tension."

I smiled again and laid my head on his shoulder. He held me for a few minutes before he got up and pulled me to my feet.

"We're leaving tonight, is everything set?" he asked as he led me back toward the house.

"For the wedding?"

"No, for the barmitzva."

I laughed. "Well, I have the dress, and the girls have their dresses. You did get the tuxes, I'm assuming."

"I had Frasier take care of that," he said dryly. "It got him off my back for a while."

It was my turn to give him the look, but I chose to ignore that comment. "Everything is all set."

"Do we have a back up place for the ceremony in case it rains?"

Lena and I had decided on the perfect spot in the garden for the ceremony, but there was no shelter if it rained. "Well, I didn't really think we could use the church," I murmured.

"We could," he replied with a chuckle, "but it would just mean removing a few things."

Yeah, like all the crosses. "I was thinking the living room, or the hall," I told him.

"Something along those lines. Everything is all set. Did you have any suggestions?" He hadn't been that involved in the preparations, he'd just told me to do whatever I wanted and he'd be there.

"So are we just following along with the wolf?"

"Yeah, we'll just follow along with what he has to say," I replied. "God, I never imagined that a werewolf would be marrying me."

He laughed. "Did you ever think that a) a priest was going to marry a vampire, b) a werewolf was going to marry a vampire c) a werewolf priest was going to marry a vampire ex-priest?"

It was quite a tangle if you thought about it that way. "No, I never imagined," I said honestly.

"And if I remember correctly, you were pretty close to the religious thing yourself," he reminded me, "so it's kind of a strange triangle."

He was referring to the fact that Papa was a priest. Not that I remembered any of that. "And we all know that I'm not close to the religious thing, and we're not going to have that argument, are we?" I was tired of hearing that I had to have faith.

"Like I have a choice," he muttered as he kissed my temple. "Why do they have me on this would be security detail?"

I looked away. "I have no idea. Did you have something else you'd rather do?"

"Christina," he drawled, "you have the look."

I tried to play innocent. "Excuse me?"

"That look," he said with a smile.

It made me smile too. "If you have something that you'd rather be doing, I'm sure they would understand."

"You're doing it again," he warned me.

I looked down. "Well, I just thought that you'd want to spend time with me."

"With you, yes," he said firmly. "When you're actually there, it's good. When I have to turn around and watch my back constantly, it's not good."

"He'd better not be behaving like that," I said fiercely. "If he is then he and I are going to have a little talk involving spooky-boo."

"He got the same look you gave me a minute ago," Jason drawled as he pulled me to my feet and led me back toward the house.

"I'll talk to him," I promised. "If you don't want a shadow, you won't have a shadow." At least not an obvious one, anyway.

"I would rather have a friend than a tail," he added.

"He's just trying to protect you," I told him.

He shook his head. "You walk into a room with eighteen people and a nine round clip," he began.

"Who walks out alive, yeah, you do," I finished for him.

"Now if I had the energy clip that he has in his," Jason said eagerly, "I could probably walk out with two shots."

I smiled. "You know if you talk to him real nice..."

"I did," he said quickly. "You know what he said? 'One day when you're smart enough.' Unfortunately, I think it's true." He shook his head ruefully. "One thing he's definitely got on me besides looks."

I looked at Jason in surprise. Frasier was cute, but he was by no means as attractive as Jason was to me. Plus, as good as he was with a gun Jason was still better. "He has looks?"

He just laughed and led me inside.

We flew out of Boston just before dawn with boxes in the hold for our transportation to the holding. I didn't worry too much about Frasier, he was getting used to my world, and anyway Rafe would be there to help him get through anything he couldn't handle.

We arrived at the holding early Wednesday evening. Jason, Brenda and I were a little stiff from the boxes we'd traveled in, but we quickly got our feet under us. Frasier and Rafe oversaw our luggage while the rest of us sat with Lena and Mikael. The baby was sleeping, but she promised that we'd be able to see him later.

Afterward, Brenda came to my room to help me unpack the dresses. I must have been a little quieter than usual because she started to look concerned.

"Chris, what's wrong?" she asked finally.

I'd been worried about Malcolm since I'd realized he was my enemy, but I'd made a big effort to hide it and I hadn't thought it showed that much. "I ah..." I sat down on the bed, not even sure of where to start. "Um, I told you I was having dreams?"

"Uh-huh."

I looked down at my hands clenched in my lap. "I'm dreaming about Lord Malcolm, the one Lena calls the Crone and Cormac calls Lord Chaos."

"What—" her voice caught and she had to clear her throat. "What are you dreaming about?"

"Well," I said slowly, "remember I told you that there was a guy that was my girlfriend's boyfriend?"

"Right."

"His name was Malcolm." It was the hardest thing I'd ever said.

She gave me an intense look. "Have you talked to Cormac about this?" she asked softly, sitting down next to me.

"Well, I haven't told him I'm dreaming of Lord Chaos, but yeah, I've talked to him about my dreams. He said that they're probably memories that are prompted by something I'm seeing." I sighed deeply. "It's so weird, Brenda."

I glanced up to see her watching me. "We knew each other, you know?" I said softly. "And he was so mad at me because Lizzy died. And—" I could almost feel the knife sinking into my arm and I rubbed at the scar on my arm.

Brenda took my hand and looked at my arm. "Where did you get that?"

"Malcolm."

"Recently, or...?"

"No, he ah, he attacked me on the street." I took my arm back and rubbed at the spot, but I could almost feel the knife in my skin. "He hated me so much." God, even talking about this made me want to cry.

Brenda put her arm around me and hugged me. I laid my head on her shoulder and let the tears fall, glad that I had a sister that would comfort me like this.

After a few minutes I was able to calm down enough to talk again. "If this is a memory Brenda," I whispered, "if it is Lord Malcolm I'm dreaming about, then Graves isn't the reason that Jason got embraced, I am."

"Chris, you can't blame someone else's actions on yourself," she said urgently, pulling back to look in my eyes. "You don't even know that, I mean, come on. Don't start talking like that."

"No, its—" How could I explain this to her? "He hated me so much, enough to kill Marcus, to kill Jason." I started crying again, in earnest this time. Sobs shook me and Brenda pulled me close again.

"Chris, don't torment yourself like this," she soothed. "Even if that's the case, you know it's not your fault that this Lizzy person died. You didn't kill her."

"Papa did," I said through my tears.

"Yeah, but that's not your fault."

Wasn't it? "But I told him where we were going."

"So?" she demanded. "How were you supposed to know that he would go all ape shit and kill her?"

My sister, ever willing to defend me even when I didn't deserve it. I took a deep breath to control my tears and it came out in a long sigh.

"You cannot take responsibility for his actions," she continued righteously, "no more than I could."

"I guess." Better to agree with her than to try and argue. I'd never win.

"No, there's no guessing about it," she said firmly. "That's fact."

"I don't know," I whispered, shaking my head. But I did know, deep down. It was my fault Jason was embraced and Lena was captured. My fault, not Graves'.

"Yeah, it may be unfortunate that those circumstances led up to that," she conceded, "but you have no control over it. What were you supposed to do? Turn yourself over to him and say 'You know, I'm really sorry that Papa was an asshole, kill me now?'" She pulled back and looked at me.

The thought of saying that to Malcolm made me laugh a little. "Yeah."

"This is not your fault," she repeated, "not at all."

"Okay," I said reluctantly, not really even sure if I agreed with her. "And I could be wrong, maybe this isn't even a memory, maybe this is just—"

"Maybe it's just a bad dream because—"

"Yeah, I've always had nightmares anyway," I said softly, "and maybe that's what it was." But it hadn't felt like a dream, it had felt real. I remembered it as being real.

I dried my tears and told myself to forget about it for the next few days. This was supposed to be a happy occasion, after all. There was so much to do before the wedding and everyone was supposed to be there tomorrow night.

Lena came in a little while later and the three of us spent the rest of the night going over the garden and the dresses and talking about the ceremony and the baby. When I crawled into bed near dawn I thought I was too tired to dream. I was wrong.

"Come child. It's time to go," I heard Papa declare. I turned to face him, sorrow filling my soul. He was dressed in his Priest's robes, but when I looked up into his face, I saw that he was glaring at me with hatred. As I opened my mouth to speak, his body shifted to that of my mentor.

"Malcolm?" I gasped. I hadn't seen him since he disappeared at Lizzy's funeral. As he opened his mouth to reply, his visage shifted ever so slightly. My hands clenched when I realized who was standing in front of me. Lord Chaos threw his head back and laughed, the

sound sending a shudder down my spine. I took a step towards him as the sound echoed down the alley, and he held up his hand, palm out.

His image shifted to that of a young black man, no more than twenty-five years old. He was just standing there smiling at me. The man turned and I saw a Latino man of the same age standing where the black man had been.

"We can help," he said in a smooth deep voice. I turned to run but a different voice stopped me cold.

"Hold, child." When I looked back again Dougal Galloway was standing before me. His image changed into that of Piston almost as soon as I realized who he was. Piston leered at me, still holding the jewel-encrusted goblet as he took a step forward. I looked away in fear at what he would do only to hear Antonio's soothing voice.

"What is wrong childe?"

I opened my eyes to see his kind face looking back at me. I was so relieved to see him....

After I woke I stayed in bed for a long time remembering the dream I'd just had. I'd met the two men while I was in college, but I couldn't remember their names, or how I'd met them. I wondered if they'd tried to help me with Malcolm and gotten killed for their efforts.

Finally I got up and got dressed. Almost everyone else was supposed to get in tonight, and I had to be ready to meet them. I went downstairs determined to be happy despite my worries about Malcolm.

Most of our guests had arrived during the day and Mikael had seen to it that they were taken to their rooms in the boxes they'd arrived in to await sunset. Rafe and Frasier were of course able to help him as were Stephen and Eliza, who had arrived with Cormac. Robert had also arrived during the day, but was still sleeping when the sun went down.

Michael Moorecock and Lucy Reynolds were the only guests who had not yet made it to the Holding, but they were supposed to arrive the next day. I was a little anxious about them being there because I knew their presence would cause some tension among the group.

Brenda had told me that Michael, her ex lover, was convinced she would eventually leave Rafe to return to his side, although I couldn't see that happening any time soon. Neither Brenda nor Antonio seemed to like Lucy, although Jason and I were fond enough of her. She was older than most of us gathered here, but she had been embraced as a child. She had agreed to be our flower girl.

My Kindred brother and his family came downstairs first. The men were reserved as usual, and Eliza seemed a little more relaxed in the company of the werewolf than she had been before. Lena made them comfortable just as Antonio came down with Idella and another Kindred woman I didn't recognize but knew had to be Victoria Monroe.

My sire had called a few nights ago to ask if he could bring a guest with him. How could I refuse? Of course I told her he could bring her. Antonio introduced me to her, and Cormac came over to say hello. Apparently he'd known her before, through Dougal. He even asked about her mother.

Nina and Estrea came down too, and soon the living room was filled with voices. Lena made sure all the introductions were made, and she had refreshments available for everyone.

I talked to Estrea for a little while, but I found the conversation frustrating. Brenda or Antonio were always with us, and as soon as the talk even began to turn to Luke or Las

Vegas, one of them changed the subject. Finally I gave up trying to talk to my friend and went to talk to Lena about decorations.

SNAPSHOTS OF THE PAST

And the leaves at my feet
Whisper sounds so familiar

Darkening of the light - Concrete Blonde

A few hours later, Robert caught my attention and asked me to come upstairs with him. I hadn't had a chance to talk to him alone since he'd arrived, so I went eagerly.

"I took a few of your belongings from when you disappeared," he told me when we reached his room. "I've been holding them. Good thing you were still hiding things in the trunk at the foot of your bed, Papa never looked under your clothes."

Yeah, I still did that even now. "Well, what do you have?"

He pulled a camera case from his suitcase and brought it over to me. With a start I realized that it was the case Marcus had given me, complete with my initials. It also had a USC Berkley sticker on it.

I took it from him and opened it. On top of the camera was a small manila envelope. I picked it up and concentrated to see what images I could of it, but I only saw Robert putting it into the case.

Slowly I pulled the pictures from the envelope and looked at the top one. It was Marcus, wearing his leather jacket and looking very thoughtful. I smiled a little, remembering how much I had loved him.

The next picture was also of Marcus, looking even more pensive than the first one. After that was one of me leaning against a wall and staring quite seriously at the camera while wearing Marcus' leather jacket. Then there was another picture of Marcus, he was standing next to his motorcycle and looking off at something to his right.

I remembered suddenly that he'd been looking at Lizzy. These two photos had been taken the day that she'd gone home early, the day of the explosion that changed all our lives forever. I really didn't want to see what the rest of the pictures were, but I knew I had to look.

It was as I'd feared. The next photograph was of Malcolm and Lizzy. They were standing very close like they usually did when they were together. It was so hard to believe that later that same day she'd been hurt so very badly.

The last picture was of Malcolm by himself. His hair was long and twisted in dread locks, and there were holes in the knees of his pants. This was the way I wanted to remember him, my friend and mentor, but more recent images of him kept invading my mind.

"Do you know them?" Robert asked. "Tina?"

I glanced up. "Yeah, I know them. This is Marcus," I said, handing him one of those pictures.

"Isn't this Joe Thorpe's kid from across town?"

Like I remembered. "Yeah, I guess. And that's me."

He shot me an amused look. "I recognized you."

I smiled. "You think?" I hesitated a moment before handing him the next picture. "This is Lizzy."

"She's naked," he said softly.

"Actually, that's a bathing suit top, trust me," I told him. I pointed to Malcolm. "And this, this was my mentor."

"I heard something about it," he murmured thoughtfully, looking down at the picture, "but..."

"Yeah," I said seeing his hesitation, "it's Malcolm."

"Ah," he murmured thoughtfully, obviously not making the connection.

"Lord Malcolm," I clarified.

He looked up at me in surprise, then back down at the picture. "Oh, shit."

"Yeah." To put it mildly.

"Oh."

"Did I mention that Papa killed Lizzy?" I asked wryly. "Which would explain why Malcolm got really pissed at me."

He frowned. "So why did he go after Lena?"

I shook my head sadly. "You know, I originally thought it was because of something Graves did, but I'm starting to think a little differently." Now I knew it was my fault. "He killed Marcus, and Jason. He was working on Lena."

I sat looking down at the picture of Marcus for a moment, saddened at the knowledge that I'd been responsible for his death. I closed my eyes and concentrated.

Robert held the picture in his hand, and I could see another picture peaking out from beneath it.

I was in a dorm room kneeling next to a trunk and putting the pictures on top of a very worn leather jacket.

There was a towel on my head and I was wearing a bathrobe while I was holding this very picture and crying. Lying on the bed around me, I could see all of the other pictures Robert had given me.

After a moment I put the pictures back into the envelope and picked up the camera. There was still film in it, and if I remembered correctly, there were a few exposures left on the roll.

You're going to need some practice with some real equipment if you're going to get into a good program in college, Marcus had told me when he'd given me the camera. If only I hadn't been so stubborn and gone like he wanted me to. Lizzy might still be alive, and so much could have been avoided.

"Do you know where the jacket is?" I asked Robert softly.

"No, I don't." His voice still seemed a little shocked. "I didn't really have a lot of time to look through things. It's probably still in the trunk, if Papa hasn't gotten rid of it."

"I don't remember seeing it when I went to visit him," I told him. "I wonder if he still has it."

"There wasn't much else in it besides clothes. Some dried up flowers—" He stopped for a moment, then cursed under his breath and went to the dresser. He opened the top drawer and pulled out a knife shaped object wrapped in a cloth and came back toward me with it. "And this."

I knew what it was the instant my fingers closed on the blade. I didn't have to pull back the cloth to see the thin blade and the dark gray handle of Lizzy's ceremonial dagger. I didn't have to, but I did.

"Jesus fucking Christ," I murmured as I looked down at it.

"Christina, watch your language," he chastised me.

"God, not another one," I drawled, looking up at him. "You know it's bad enough I hear it from Jason and Frasier; I don't need it from you too, really."

He smiled. "I'm just looking out for you."

I wrapped the knife back up and rested it on my leg. "Is there anything else that you're forgetting?"

"No, I didn't have a lot of time," he told me sadly. "Papa was in the house."

My eyebrow shot up. "That wasn't real bright." He was lucky Papa hadn't killed him. Again.

He shrugged. "He came home unexpectedly."

I took a deep breath to steady my nerves. "Okay, well, I'm going to go put these in my room, we probably should go back downstairs."

He looked at my face closely. "Are you going to be okay?"

"Yeah," I said quickly. "Yeah, I'm fine." Or I would be, eventually. I took the stuff into my bedroom and buried it at the bottom of my suitcase. Robert was waiting for me in the hall and we went downstairs together.

I spent a little while talking to Nina and Estrea before I saw Jason and Graves come into the room. When Lena grabbed Graves' arm and pulled him back out, I went to talk to Jason.

"So how are things going?" I asked as I kissed his cheek.

"Not bad," he replied quietly.

That didn't sound too good. "Getting cold feet?"

He glanced down then smiled up at me. "I'm dead."

I laughed. "Colder than usual, Jason."

"No," he said honestly. "I'm looking forward."

Well, that was a relief. "I just got done looking backward."

"Back on?"

"Well, Robert had a few things of mine from before," I told him.

"Really?"

"Yeah, rather surprising." And upsetting, but I wasn't going to say that.

"That's good," he reminded me.

"Not really," I murmured, "but yeah."

He rubbed the spot on my arm where my nails had dug into his skin the last time we'd had a conversation about my past. "It scares me when you say it that way."

I smiled grimly. "Well, he had my camera and a few pictures from high school."

"Friends, family?" he prompted.

"Friends, then anyway," I told him. I wondered for a moment if I should show him, but I knew that I had to. "Do you want to go up and take a look?"

"Sure," he said easily.

"Are you sure?" I asked earnestly. "'Cause I don't want to ruin your evening."

"I'm with you," he said softly. "Nothing could ruin my evening."

I chuckled ruefully. "You haven't seen the pictures."

Threading my arm through his, I led him upstairs to my room where I pulled the camera case out and brought it over to bed. I took out the pictures and handed him all of them except the ones of Malcolm.

"This is Marcus," I said as he looked at the top one. "Remember I told you about him?"

"Oh, yes," he replied. "He seems to be a fairly troubled young man."

In the pictures, he did look like that. I didn't remember him enough to say if that was what he was really like. "Kind of serious."

"It looks like something was bugging him," he added, turning to the next picture. "I like the bike."

I smiled. "I liked it too, if I remember it correctly."

"So this is an ex?"

"He was killed," I reminded him sadly.

He looked up at me. "By?"

I handed him the rest of the pictures. "Malcolm."

Jason looked down and when he growled I knew he recognized his tormentor.

"I warned you," I said sorrowfully. "I told you it would ruin your evening."

He cleared his throat. "Where did you get these?"

"I told you, Robert had them."

"Where did he get them?" he demanded, looking at me intently.

"He pulled them out of my trunk at Papa's house after I disappeared." When he finally looked at the last picture, I added, "I told you I knew Malcolm. That's Lizzy."

"She's naked," he murmured.

"No," I told him, amused that he even noticed her state of dress. "It's a bathing suit."

When he sighed, I took the pictures from him. "Let me just put these back away," I said softly. I knew he was upset because his hands were shaking. Showing him the photographs had been a bad idea.

He watched me put the photos back in the case. "He brought you the case as well?"

"He did," I told him, pulling the camera out to show him. "There's film in the camera and when I get home I'll get it developed."

"I'm anxious to see what's on them," he murmured.

"Well, they don't exactly have a photo mart in the middle of Austria," I reminded him, "so it will have to wait until we get back. I'm pretty anxious to see what's on the roll myself."

"What exactly happened?" he asked suddenly.

"With?"

"It," he growled.

I sighed. "Well, I told you he was my mentor. We were—" Damn, it was so hard to talk about this with him. "The four of us were all out and about one day and Lizzy got sick so she gated home and there was a gas explosion. Remember I told you about this?"

"I don't know," he mumbled. "It's all kind of a haze right now."

I didn't blame him, I was thinking none too clearly myself. "Malcolm blamed Papa, and me, got really pissed and killed Marcus."

"I seem to recall his temper."

He rubbed his left wrist and I remembered the horror I'd felt when I'd learned it had been cut off. Luckily Jason had been allowed to regrow it before his embrace. Then I remembered that it was my fault Malcolm had captured him to begin with.

"He got really pissed and he killed Marcus," I repeated softly. "And um, did I show you the knife?"

I went back to the suitcase for the knife and sat down next to him on the bed. "This was Lizzy's ceremonial dagger. He attacked me with it one night." I turned my left arm and show Jason the scar on the underside. The exit scar on top of my arm was too small to really see unless you knew what you were looking for. "So that pretty much is all I can remember."

"What tradition is he?" he demanded softly.

"Verbena," I told him, closing my eyes. "Which explains why the Verbena were following L-Lena and I and—" Hell, I couldn't avoid saying his name forever. "Luke through Europe."

Maybe I should have avoided it, Luke's name was like acid on Jason's temper. I got up and quietly put everything back in my suitcase, trying to give him room and time to calm down.

"I warned you this would ruin your night," I reminded him when I was done.

He sighed heavily, and I felt like such an idiot for bringing up the subjects of Malcolm and Luke. Jason looked like he could kill something, and I hoped that he'd calm down before we went back downstairs.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, looking down at the floor.

"It's okay," he told me, standing and coming to take me in his arms. "It's not your fault."

I wanted to laugh; of course it was my fault, everything was my fault. "Yeah, right," I breathed. "Whatever."

He kissed my temple. "So, other than that, how was your day?"

"Well, other than the usual nightmares," I admitted, "it was fine. How was yours?"

"Not too bad."

"Well, you know that Michael is supposed to be here," I warned him. I liked Michael, but Antonio and I seemed to be the only ones here who did.

"I know," he all but growled.

I smiled against his shoulder. "Wouldn't he do as a nice stand in for the Brujah?" I teased.

Jason moved back and pulled his gun, taking a bullet from the chamber and holding it up to the light. Tiny letters spelled out Michael's name. "Just in case he shows up," he told me smugly.

I hoped he wasn't serious. "You know, you might want to keep that in your gun, 'cause he is supposed to be here."

"That's okay," he drawled. "I've got back up." He popped the clip and showed me the next bullet in line to be fired.

I laughed. "Two of them. You know really should have taken the chance to shoot him in Salem when you could."

"I did," he said seriously.

That surprised me. "Did you miss?"

He shot me a hard look. "I don't miss."

"I'm sorry," I said, biting my lips to keep from laughing.

We went downstairs soon afterward to be with our guests. I could tell he was still upset though, because every time I looked over at him, he was twisting his ring. Of course, I was twisting mine too.

Brenda suggested we check out the garden where the ceremony was going to be, and all of us girls went outside. Well, all but Eliza. She didn't move more than five feet from Cormac the entire evening except to use the ladies room and hold the baby.

Near dawn I went to bed and hoped I'd dream about good things, like the wedding, or my fiancé. It's a shame that we don't always get what we want.

DREAMWALKING

And attacked from all sides

By a world filled with poison and hate

The Sky Is a Poisonous Garden - Concrete Blonde

I was trying to straighten the hem of my dress as I came down the stairs, carrying my shoes in one hand and my purse in the other. When I reached the bottom, I leaned on the banister pole for support as I slipped the shoes on.

Normally I liked the color black, but I found it hard to like anything the last few days.

As I headed for the door my father came up behind me. "Just where do you think you're going?" he bellowed.

"I'm going to the funeral," I told him in a hard voice without turning around. "And you can't stop me, Papa."

"You will do as I say!" he shouted as he grabbed my arm.

I tried to break free but he had a firm grip and he was much stronger than I was.

"Haven't you learned to stay away from those people yet? How many more of them have to get themselves killed before you realize how evil they are?"

If only Papa would accept the abilities I'd been developing. I really was getting good, almost as good as Lizzy had been. But I hadn't been able to concentrate since...

I broke down into tears again just thinking about Lizzy lying there in that hospital bed for a week before she died. Then Malcolm had disappeared, and now Marcus was dead too. My legs gave out and I would have fallen to the floor if my father hadn't caught me.

"Calm down, dear," he said, his voice kinder than I'd heard it in a long time.

I stopped sobbing but the tears were still running down my face.

"Come on, Tina, let's get you back upstairs." He helped me to my feet and led me back up to my room, holding me close all the way. I laid down on the bed and tried to calm myself down, but I couldn't stop crying completely and I felt very confused.

Papa had acted so lovingly today, but during the last month he'd been so hard. It was almost as if he hadn't been surprised when Lizzy had died. I pushed those thoughts from my mind as I tried to get comfortable.

Some time later I got up and drew myself a hot bath. As I relax, I finally drifted off to sleep for the first time in what felt like days.

Tina, I heard Malcolm say in my mind, but I wasn't sure if I was dreaming or not. Tina, we missed you today. Marcus looked so peaceful, so happy that he wasn't here anymore. Then his voice changed, becoming harder, filled with hate.

He understood why he died. I explained it to him before I broke his fucking neck.

I sat bolt upright in the bathtub on the verge of screaming, but I quickly realized that I had been sleeping. It had just been a horrible dream. As I laid back in the water, Malcolm's voice came to me once again, still filled with hatred.

You killed my love. I killed yours.

I sat up again, startled by the harshness of his voice. After a few shaky breaths, I laid back. I closed my eyes trying to think of something else, but I couldn't shake the feeling that he was still in my mind.

I gasped when I felt something touch the inside of my thigh under the water. Something was in the tub with me! I shrank back and stood quickly, looking down into the water. Floating on the surface was a hand. Looking closer, I realized that it was a man's left hand, and on the ring finger was a gold wedding band.

In my mind I heard Malcolm singing. There's a crack in the mirror and a bloodstain on the bed...

Something wakes me, but for a moment I can't identify what it is. I sit bolt upright in the bed and Malcolm's voice fills my head. There's a crack in the mirror and a bloodstain on the bed...

A quick glance at the vanity mirror shows that it has a long crack running down the length of it. I feel something cold and wet in the bed with me and I slowly peel back the covers. The sheets and my pajamas are covered with blood.

There is a horrible smell in the air, I'm not sure what it is. When I heighten my senses I can identify it; fire, blood, gunpowder, and burning flesh. The smells are distinct, fresh, and coming from the hallway. I grab my gun from the bedside table and run from the room, intent on finding the source of the odors.

It is coming from downstairs and getting stronger as I move toward the stairs. By the time I reach the landing the stench is almost overwhelming. I can see smoke coming from the living room doorway as I make my way carefully down the steps.

I try to project a mental thought to Brenda, but when I reach out there is no reply. As I move toward the living room, I hear a loud sucking sound. I move carefully, cautiously, not wanting to walk into a trap. Instead, I walk into a nightmare.

The chairs have been kicked away from the center of the room and standing in the space they'd once occupied was the mage Cormac calls Lord Chaos. His face is wrinkled and there is an X shaped brand between his black eyes. He looks old, haggard, evil.

Standing to his right is a tall hooded figure wearing black robes. He is half turned away from me so I can't see his face, and his hands are covered with dark gloves. My instincts tell me I've seen that figure before, but I reject the thought even as it runs across my mind.

Scattered on the floor around them are bodies and blood. I see Lena there with her throat ripped out. Mikael is nearby with bullet holes in his chest, his blood spilling on the ground around the remains of the baby. Rafe is there too, lying face down in a pool of his own blood. And off to one side is Robert, blood matting in the remains of his hair.

What shocks me the most is the sight of Brenda kneeling over a lifeless Antonio, drinking from his neck. His head is thrown back and from look on his face and way she is drinking, I know that she is trying to drain the life force from his unconscious body.

Rage fills me. Malcolm has done this, done all of it. He wants to pay me back by destroying everything I care about and he is doing a damned fine job of it. I step away from the doorway and raise my gun to fire at him, but before I can pull the trigger, the hooded man raises his head to look at me.

It is Jason, just as I knew it would be, and he has a brand that matches Malcolm's between his eyes. My shot goes wild, the phosphorous exploding fire against the far wall.

Brenda straightens and wipes the blood from her lips. It disgusts me to think that she's fallen so far under Malcolm's spell that she can heartlessly kill our sire. Slowly she pulls a Glock from beneath her jacket.

Before I can fire at Malcolm again, Jason steps between us, leaving me almost in shock. Jason is in league with Lord Chaos? He's helping him? What the hell is going on?

I know there is no way I'll be able to fire at him, nothing he does could ever make me shoot the man I love so very much. If he's joined forces with the Crone then it's my fault.

My sister raises her gun and points it at me. "You stupid bitch!" she shouts. "What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

At that instant, Jason raises his gun and calls out for me to move. Without a second's hesitation I dive to my left. As soon as I am out of the way, I hear Frasier's voice.

"What the hell is going on?" he demands from the doorway.

"Thanks," Jason says to me, his voice low and cold. "I've been wanting to do this for a long time."

Brenda stands and kicks Antonio's lifeless body before moving closer to Malcolm. Time slows to a crawl as I scream for Frasier to get down. I know he's going to die, but I also know that there is nothing I can do to stop it. I can't shoot Jason or Malcolm, but I can shoot Brenda, the murderer of our sire.

Jason aims for Frasier and from the corner of my eye I see the bullet hit him square in the chest. He goes flying back into the hall, and the smell of burning flesh and the sorrow I feel at his death nearly overwhelms me.

When my sister points her gun at me I don't even try to dodge the bullet. Everything I have ever cared about is in this room, dead or turned against me. I fire at her even as I feel the impact of her bullet in my stomach. Blackness engulfs my world.

I wake to someone slapping me sharply across the face and a weight on my chest that also pins my arms to the floor. My stomach burns and my gun is gone. When I open my eyes, I see that Jason is sitting on top of me, looking down at me with contempt.

A movement behind him draws my attention and I see Malcolm standing there, a satisfied smirk on his face.

"Is she still alive?" Brenda demands from his side, her face hateful and bitter. The shoulder of her shirt is burned away and I can see her charred skin beneath what was left of the fabric.

"Barely," Jason replies. He seems disappointed.

"Damn it!" she exclaims angrily.

"What do you wish of her, Crone?" Jason asks. He looks ready to do whatever Malcolm wants him to.

Lord Chaos steps closer, and I can see the blood on his teeth as he gives a contemptuous sigh. "Poor little Tina," he murmurs mockingly.

"I can't believe that she was so naïve to believe we cared about her," Jason says scathingly, his eyes colder than I've ever seen them.

I look at Malcolm wondering how it has come this far. Hadn't he already destroyed enough people in my life? "Why are you doing this?" I whisper.

"I showed them what happens to the people you love," he tells me coldly. "Your mother, your brother, Lizzy, Marcus, Jason—"

"Twice," Jason puts in with a sardonic smile.

"Lena, Antonio—" the mage continues.

"You made him weak," Brenda tells me.

"You have destroyed everything you have ever loved," Malcolm finishes bluntly.

"Do you really think this is going to bring her back?" I demand flatly. It takes everything I have to keep the painful emotions I feel from my voice.

"That doesn't matter anymore," he replies dismissively. "The only thing that matters is getting my revenge for what you did."

"What would she think of you now?" I ask sadly. I know there is no way Lizzy would ever approve of his actions.

"I'm past that now," he tells me, his voice cold as ice. "She's dead, and anyway I don't care anymore." He looks down at me for what feels like a long time, savoring the fact that I am under his control. "Kill her," he says at last.

This can't be happening, Jason and Brenda wouldn't kill me. I look up at the man I love with all my heart, with all my soul. "Jason," I whisper pleadingly.

His reply breaks my heart as he says the same words he said to me two years ago on the streets of San Francisco.

"Get over it," he says as he places the barrel of his gun underneath my chin.

Brenda leans over and touches her gun to my forehead. I close my eyes and wait for the explosions that will end my existence...

GATEWAYS

In the quiet secret places

Are you there? Are you there?

Darkening of the light - Concrete Blonde

Suddenly I realized that someone was on the bed. I felt hands on my shoulders shaking me. I sat up and reached for the intruder's throat even as I realized that it was Jason. The claws shot out almost of their own volition and bit into the skin of his neck. He froze with his hands still on my shoulders.

"Christina," he whispered through my iron grip on his throat, "what's wrong?"

I glanced to my right at the mirror and the instant my eyes fell on the glass it broke. Turning back to Jason I saw Brenda enter the room behind him, still in her nightgown.

I felt something wet seeping down my thumb and realized that one of my claws had cut through the skin of his neck and blood was running slowly down my hand. As I watched, it dripped slowly to the sheets, staining the white linen.

Once again I heard Malcolm's voice in my head. *There's a crack in the mirror and a bloodstain on the bed....*

My gun was to on the nightstand just out of reach, but a moment's quick concentration levitated it over so that I could grab it with my left hand. I immediately pointed it at Brenda and she stopped, shock written all over her face.

"Jesus Fucking Christ," I hissed softly.

"Christina," Jason chastised as well as he could with my hand choking his windpipe.

Was I awake? Was I dreaming? Had I dreamed the last few weeks? I tried to feel Jason's skin under my hand, but it was clenched so tightly on his throat that I couldn't tell if his skin was smooth or bumpy under my fingers.

"What the fuck is going on?" I demanded angrily, fighting for control of the beast within me that wanted to break free and destroy these two people who just a moment ago had been trying to kill me.

"Go get Frasier," Jason called back to Brenda.

"Chris, what the hell are you doing?" she asked, very confused. "Was he trying to leave again and you're stopping him?" She stood there staring at us, a hand on her shoulder. It was the very spot I'd shot her only moments ago.

I was too shaken to answer her, so Jason did.

"I don't know," he said hoarsely, "she did this the other night but it wasn't this bad."

"Where's Antonio?" I demanded of Brenda. The instant I said his name, I searched for him with my mind.

Yes, my childe? he replied quickly.

Where are you? I asked frantically, relieved that he still lived.

In my room, he told me, his words calm. *Where are you?*

In my room, I replied wryly, *with a gun on Brenda and a claw in Jason's throat.* It was hard for me to control the blind panic I felt but somehow I was managing.

What? The shock he felt came across to me in just that one word.

I just had this really weird experience and you were dead, I told him bluntly. Something wasn't right here. I couldn't tell if this was real or if what had happened before was real, but I knew I had to find out what which one was reality before I let my guard down.

"Can you loosen up just a little, please?" Jason asked calmly. He let go of my shoulders and held his hands up, palms toward me.

"In a minute," I told him, not loosening my grip at all. *Could you please come to my room NOW?* I called to Antonio desperately.

Certainly, came his reply.

"Or at least take it out?" Jason suggested.

I didn't bother to answer him. I wanted to see Antonio with my own eyes before I could bring myself to believe that he was still alive.

"Chris, did you have another dream?" Brenda asked softly, obviously trying not to spook me any more than I already was. "Because I sure as hell did."

"What was your dream?" I demanded coldly.

"Well," she began, but Jason interrupted her.

"It looks like we all had them," he said roughly. "I'm kind of feeling mine a little more, though."

"Something about a funeral and a bathtub," Brenda told me.

"And someone missing the funeral because daddy wouldn't let her go," Jason added.

"Yeah," she agreed hoarsely, looking hesitantly toward Jason. "And a hand?"

"I'm the one with a claw in my throat," he told her, trying to smile. "I'm the only one supposed to sound like that."

Brenda looked at me sternly. "Unless you want to do some permanent damage, you might want to let go."

She was right, of course. I couldn't shoot a few minutes ago, what made me think I could kill him now? I eased the claw from his skin, but I didn't let go of his throat. I couldn't forget the way that he'd looked down at me in disgust with Malcolm standing at his shoulder.

"This is supposed to be after the wedding," he told me, trying to be funny.

To my great relief, Antonio came into the room and walked over to stand beside Brenda. His gaze quickly took in my gun and the claws at Jason's throat before he looked questioningly at Brenda.

She put a hand on his shoulder. "I had a weird dream and it sounds like Jason did too," she told him, her voice still sounding very worried. "I came in and found this."

"Hi," Jason called over his shoulder. "How ya doin'?"

I didn't bother to say anything out loud. Through our mental link I sent Antonio images from the dream; waking to the smell of blood and burning flesh, smoke and gunpowder; seeing the bodies that littered the floor; Brenda with her fangs in our sire's throat; of Jason shooting Frasier; Brenda and I shooting each other. I also sent a replay of the words that Malcolm had spoken to me.

While I was distracted with Antonio, Jason's hand shot up and knocked my hand away from his throat but he didn't move away. I scooted back toward the headboard and all at once I felt a burning pain in my stomach where Brenda had shot me.

Keeping the gun on both Jason and Brenda, I ran my right hand over my abdomen, but there was no wound, no blood except Jason's.

Antonio's shock showed on his face. He shot a puzzled glance between Jason and Brenda before looking back at me expectantly.

"Anyone else have the feeling that we're left out of the informational loop?" Jason asked, rubbing his neck.

My head was finally clearing of the panic I'd felt and I pointed the gun at the ceiling. "I'm assuming it was just a dream," I murmured regretfully.

"I think that would be an understatement," Antonio agreed, his Spanish accent strong.

"What are you talking about?" Brenda demanded.

Antonio just looked at her, but from the expression on her face I knew he was passing along the images from my dream. Her mouth dropped open and she staggered a little on her feet. She looked at me, stunned, horror in her eyes.

"Your shoulder hurts," I said softly, watching her rub where my bullet had hit. When she looked down at the spot, I added, "Because my stomach hurts. Okay, is it my imagination or is the mirror broken?"

Everyone turned to look at the mirror.

"Yeah," Brenda whispered.

"It's cracked," Antonio agreed.

I looked down at the sheets where Jason's vitae had dripped from my hand. "And there's blood on the bed."

"On my shirt," Jason added, "my pants, on the bed, your arm."

"On the bed," I repeated insistently.

"A little bit," Antonio murmured.

Brenda looked at him, still confused. "What does that mean?"

Jason got it. "Isn't there a song?" he asked facetiously.

"Actually, there is," I told him quite seriously, "and you know, I keep hearing Malcolm singing it to me."

"Why would he be singing it to you?" Brenda questioned.

"I don't know," I admitted, "but 'crack in the mirror and a bloodstain on the bed'. The mirror wasn't cracked until I looked at it."

We heard footsteps moving down the hall and we all turned to look as Frasier came into the room.

I looked at Jason feeling more tired than I could ever remember. "Don't shoot him."

"What?" Brenda demanded.

At my words, Frasier pulled his gun and pointed it at Jason, an almost panicked expression on his face.

"You can't shoot him either," I said crossly. This was the last damn thing I needed tonight. "Put it away."

Brenda stepped closer to him and put her arm out, trying to intervene. He took a step away from her and closer to me, but he did raise the gun.

"Put it away," I repeated harshly.

Frasier took a slow careful look around the room, but he did what I said.

"Does someone want to fill me in on what's going on?" Jason asked softly.

"Yeah, me too," Frasier put in.

With the tense situation finally over, my hands started to shake. I laid the gun down on the bed and retracted the claws on my right hand. There was still blood on my hand and without thinking I almost licked it off. Then I remembered that it was Jason's blood. As he ripped a part of his shirt to tie around the wound on his neck, I wiped my hand on the bed sheets.

"I just--" My voice was shaking and I stopped to take a deep breath before I could continue. "I had this really weird dream that led into this other weird dream that-that she was diablerizing Antonio," I said pointing at Brenda, "and you shot Frasier and then you had this 'X' branded in the middle of your forehead," I told Jason. "You remember who else has that? 'Cause he was standing right next to you."

"The first part I could see," he said dryly. "The other? Uh-uh."

"And then she shot me," I added.

"Again?" Both Frasier and Jason exclaimed.

I raised a chastising eyebrow at the both of them.

"Are you okay?" Brenda asked, taking a step toward the bed.

"Physically?" Emotionally I was still a wreck. "My stomach still hurts, but there appears to be no blood." When I rubbed at the spot, Jason eased his hand over mine soothingly.

I reached up and touched the fabric on his neck gently. "I'm sorry," I said softly. "You woke me up, of course that was after you woke me up and were shooting me in the head. It was the whole dream thing."

He seemed too shaken to speak for a moment. "What-what would make you think I would do that?"

"Oh, it was a pretty vivid dream," I confessed ruefully. "You had a gun under my chin, and Brenda had a gun on my forehead, and then all of a sudden you were shaking me awake."

He looked into my eyes sadly. "Do you honestly believe that I would hurt you?"

"Well, I didn't think so," I admitted. "I couldn't shoot you in my dream. I shot her."

He smiled. "Well, fair is fair."

"That was an accident," I insisted as I let him pull me into his arms. "I'm sorry, it was like everyone was dead except the three of you."

"I know that feeling, so I kind of can understand," he told me, reminding me that he had once been the sole survivor of an attack on a monastery. "Slightly."

I remembered what Cormac had told me about dreamwalking being interactive, and that's what my dream had been. I had to assume that Malcolm was nearby. I looked frantically at Frasier. "Is everything okay?" I demanded quickly. "Has anything happened today? Any weird stuff? Any strangers around?"

He shook his head. "Well, our last two guests have arrived," he told me. "They just came down. The girl was smelling flowers and Michael was bitching about his box." He added something under his breath, the only word of which I understood was 'asshole'.

"Funny how everyone has this opinion of Michael," I drawled. "If-if Malcolm is dreamwalking, and he's close enough to break the mirror," I asked Jason, "doesn't it seem likely that he's around somewhere?"

Apparently I'd lost him somewhere. "Ah, excuse me?"

"Dreamwalking," I repeated.

"Spekenze Gangrellish?" he asked drolly.

"You know," I said impatiently, "like he's affecting my dreams, manipulating them. What was that you said about a dream that you had? About—"

"About you going to the funeral and the picture of that one guy you had," he told me.

"Did you dream about the bathtub too and the hand?" I asked, but I knew the answer.

"Yeah."

This wasn't good. "So I'm not the only one who's dreams he's walking in."

"Wait a minute," Jason said hotly, "you're telling me that he's telling me what to dream?"

"Yeah," I confirmed, "and her, and me."

"And you said he had to be close to do this?"

"Well, I don't know about that," I admitted, "but it seems like he'd have to be close to do that." I turned and pointed at the broken mirror.

Jason looked at my sire. "Antonio?"

"Perhaps our Lupine friends can find something," he replied.

"I'm going to check on Lena," Brenda told me.

I was glad she'd thought of it. "Please."

"I think we have a hunting party," Jason murmured.

Antonio followed Frasier and Brenda out of the room, leaving me alone with Jason.

"If there's this link thing, can we track him?" he asked.

"I don't know, it's a mage ability." There was just so much I didn't remember about being a mage.

"What mages do—" he began, then said, "Cormac."

I nodded. "He knows mages."

Jason felt in his pocket for his phone, but it wasn't there. "Where's your phone?" he asked quickly.

I pointed toward the dresser. "Over there."

He went and got it, then dialed a number. We could hear another phone ringing down the hall before Cormac answered it.

"Hello?"

"You want to come up to Chris' room, right away please?" Jason asked a little too nicely.

"Sure," he replied, sounding calm as usual. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Jason replied, "we just think you may have some fun."

"Oh, God," I murmured as he hung up. "Fun? You call this fun?" I demanded softly, looking at the strip of fabric on his neck. "Is that going to show over your tux?"

"I'll wear a turtleneck," he told me, bending to give me a quick kiss.

Cormac came slowly around the corner of the doorway, his gun drawn but held down by his side. When he saw no immediate danger, he came in with Eliza right behind him. She had a stake in her right hand, although it wasn't poised for the strike.

"What's wrong?" my Kindred brother demanded in a low voice.

"Do you remember our talk about dreamwalking?" I asked him softly. When he nodded, I said, "I know you said he wouldn't have to be close for that, but how close would he have to be to—"

"Why'd you break the mirror?" he asked, looking over at it.

"—break the mirror?" I finished at the same time, pointing at the broken glass.

"I'm going to get Graves and Daedelus down here," Jason murmured, dialing the phone.

I grabbed it out of his hand. "Do not call all these people to my room," I said sternly.

"You look cute," he told me.

"Whatever." His flattery would get him nowhere, not this time. "How would you like a cut to match on the other side?"

"It's going to happen eventually anyway," he said with a grin.

Cormac ignored us and walked over to the mirror. He placed his hand on the crack and a second later his head spun to look at the doorway to the hall. "Apparently very close," he murmured, his voice low and dangerous.

"How close?" I demanded.

"Well, he's not here anymore," he assured me.

That wasn't good enough. "How close?" When he didn't answer me, I got out of the bed and went to the vanity myself.

Cormac took a breath and exhaled softly on the glass just as I reached him. In the fog it left behind, I could see a hand print right across the middle of the crack.

I stared at the mirror for a long moment before I put my hand directly over the print on the glass.

Cormac stood with his hand on the glass looking toward the doorway.

There was a person shaped blur standing near the dresser with what seemed to be an arm reaching out and touching the glass. The vision caught the mirror in the process of breaking.

I gasped and pulled my hand away, rubbing it on the leg of my pajamas. "Can we assume he gated out of here?" I asked softly.

"Yes," Cormac agreed.

"So he could be anywhere." God, this was so frustrating.

"Yes, that would be a logical assumption," he agreed.

I looked up at him. "Do you know any kind of ward or anything to keep him out of the holding?"

He shook his head. "Most wards don't encompass the entire object to be protected," he reminded me. "A barrier, like a doorstep, a window is warded. They cannot cross it physically. He could gate in past it."

Fuck. I searched my mind for anything that would work, but I came up empty. "Any mage thing that you know of that could prevent him from coming in?" I asked desperately before I remembered that we did have a mage at the holding with us. "Where's Robert? Maybe he knows."

"Perhaps," Cormac murmured.

I shivered at the knowledge that my greatest enemy had been in the very room I'd been sleeping in. Ruthlessly I pushed the fear I felt away.

"I need to get dressed," I said pointedly.

Cormac turned and ushered Eliza out of the room, closing the door behind them. Jason stayed with me while I got dressed and we went to find Robert.

"Do you know any rituals that could be used on the house to prevent anyone from gating in?" I asked as soon as we found him and told him what was going on.

"I know something we could try," he replied, "but we would need something of his."

"I don't suppose a picture would work," I said, knowing the answer was no.

"Those are your pictures," he reminded me. "It's not quite personal enough."

"The knife was Lizzy's," I mumbled to myself. I just didn't have anything that had belonged to Malcolm.

"Something he's touched lately?" Jason suggested.

"The mirror, upstairs," I put in.

Robert shook his head. "It takes more than a touch, we'd need something personal, like a cross, or jewelry."

Jason looked at me. "Should we check the floor to see if he dropped anything?"

I shrugged. "You can check, but I doubt you'll find anything."

"I'll go check," he told me.

Then a thought occurred to me and I laid a hand on his arm. "What about the coins that you found in Lena's room?" I asked Robert. "I think those were Malcolm's."

He nodded. "That might work, if it's the best thing we have."

It was. "We could try. Who has the coins?" I asked Jason. "Cormac?"

"I passed him," Robert told me. "He's downstairs."

"We'll find him," I replied. "Damn it, where's my phone?"

Jason handed it to me and I quickly called Cormac's cell phone.

"Yes, Christina?" he drawled when he answered.

"Cormac, do you have those coins that Jason—" It wasn't Jason, damn it. I had to slow down or I'd go insane. "That Robert found in Lena's room, that we took to Ramadan with us?" I asked him carefully. "Do you have those coins?"

"I have one of them," he said slowly.

"Could you bring it to us please?" I asked softly. "Robert's going to do a... whatever it is they do to try and keep Malcolm out." For the life of me I couldn't think of the word.

"A spell?" he asked, sounding amused.

"Yeah, that's it."

"Where are you?"

"I'm on my way downstairs." I was actually on the upper landing of the hall headed for the stairs.

"Okay." He hung up when he came into the hall and I heard him mumbling something about walkie-talkies.

"You know, if Antonio would let us teach the whole mind thing then we wouldn't have to do this," I told Jason.

"You really have to show me that," he agreed.

I smiled. "I'm not sure if you could without Tremere blood." I held out my wrist to him in what was quickly becoming a standing joke between us. The stern look he gave me made me smile.

Jason smiled. "Well I couldn't let my dear drain herself, so we must replenish her." At that he offered his wrist to me.

"Children," Cormac drawled, reminding us of the situation. "Not at the Holding."

I laughed and took the coin from Cormac. "I don't think so, I'm in enough trouble, thank you," I reminded Jason as I handed the coin to Robert. "Do you need anything else?"

"Time," he said patiently.

There would never be enough time if Malcolm decided to come back now. "Blood of a chicken?" I offered anxiously.

"No," he replied seriously enough, "that's a Verbena ritual."

I tried to smile. "I knew there was something."

"See?" Jason said quickly. "I told you."

Robert went off to do the ritual while Jason and I returned to the gathering. After a while the dream faded a bit from my memory, but my stomach never did stop hurting.

Toward midnight the other women and I began to set up the chairs and decorations for the ceremony. I noticed that Lucy stuck pretty close to Jason, Michael or me all night, and it almost made me feel bad that I'd invited her.

I took the time to talk to Victoria a little. She lived in England, but had spent a little time in Salem over the years. She had a ghoul that she had chosen not to bring to the holding with her, but from what she said I thought he would have fit right in.

Near dawn a tired looking Robert came back downstairs. He took me aside and told me that he'd done the ritual I'd asked for, but there was no way to tell if he had actually succeeded unless Malcolm showed up. Of course that didn't settle my mind too well, but there was nothing I could do about it. I just had to put my faith in my brother's abilities and hope everything turned out all right.

VOWS

You were meant to be together

Like a fog around a mountain, forever and ever

Luffaby - Concrete Blonde

"Some friends," I mumbled to myself. The sounds from the club behind me were barely audible as I walked away from it. "I'm gonna kill 'em when I get my hands on those two."

I had been out with some of my friends and roommates from college, but when their boyfriends had shown up, they'd taken off, leaving me alone.

Across the street I could see five guys standing around their motorcycles. One of them noticed me looking at them and pointed me out to his friends. They all turned and immediately started in whistling and catcalling. I did my best to ignore them and kept walking down the street away from them.

I had let Gena dress me, and she had chosen some rather questionable clothes. 'All the better to help you get a man,' I could still hear her saying. I was pretty sure that the dangerous looking bikers were not the kind of man she had meant.

Behind me I could hear them start after me, still calling out. I knew I was severely outnumbered and I walked faster, trying to hide my fear. They started running after me and as I felt them get closer I decided that the only option I had was to make a stand. They thought they were just chasing down a helpless college chick, they had no idea I was mage.

I turned and used my powers to push the closest one back. I must have had more adrenaline going than I'd thought because he went sailing almost back to where the bikes were parked. That stopped the others short, all but the big Hispanic one.

Jesus, his eyes were glowing red! He stepped in front of the others, a smile playing on his lips. He started laughing, a deep rumbling laugh, and the hairs on the back of my neck stood on end at the sound. The laugh slowly died down to a low snarl before it faded.

"Looks like we got a live one, boys," he growled in a thick Mexican accent. As he stepped into the light his eyes stopped glowing and turned a dark shade of gray.

"I'll never let you touch me, you—"

I was going to say asshole, but then he smiled and I got a good look at his teeth. His canines were a lot longer than they were supposed to be, and sharp. He raised his hand and as I watched claws grew from his fingertips.

I'd seen enough; I turned and ran.

"Get her!" I heard that... thing say, and I could tell that the others were running after me. Somehow I was actually managing to outrun them. I turned into a construction yard and saw a chain link fence on the other side with a large hole in it. When I was almost to the fence, I glanced back to see how close my pursuers were.

When I saw that they were closing on me, I turned back to make my way through the fence only to run into someone standing in the opening. I landed hard on my back and looked up to see a tall black man standing over me.

He was wearing gray slacks with a dark brown leather jacket zipped all the way up to his chin. His head was shaved and he was wearing black sunglasses that hid his eyes, but my gaze was drawn to his mouth. He was smiling wide, and I could see that he had fangs too. He was looking at the guys who had been chasing me and I heard them come to a stop just beyond me when the black man hissed at them.

"Don't worry, muchacha," I heard a deep voice say from somewhere above me. "We can help."

I looked up and saw another man standing on a steel girder high off the ground. He was wearing black leather pants and a gray leather jacket. His hair was cut short and there was a pencil thin mustache above his lips. As I watched, he took a step off of the girder and floated lightly to the ground. He landed effortlessly next to me on his feet before turning to me.

"I am Zach DelaRocha," he said with a small bow. He held his arm out toward the black man who had yet to move. "This is my comrade, Archie."

At the mention of his name, Archie hissed again and takes a step toward the three men and the monster that were still standing behind me.

Zach turned his attention to them as well. "And this dog is Russell, and his puppies."

"Fuck you, warlock!" Russell yelled at Zach.

"Not tonight, Russ," a new voice put in. "Me and you got business to finish first."

Everybody turned to look at the newcomer. He was about five foot nine inches, with flowing brown hair, dressed in jeans and open shirt with an old black leather jacket over top of it all.

"Back off, Luke," Russell barked. "This toy is mine."

"There will be another time," Luke told him. "You owe me right now. Zach, take your party and go, this is going to get messy." At the last, he bared fangs of his own and started advancing on Russell.

I woke as the sun went down, knowing immediately that the dream had in fact been a memory. At first I was angry that Luke had never mentioned the incident to me, but then I realized that at the time he'd been a little preoccupied with Russell and probably hadn't even see me.

I didn't remember seeing any of the Kindred before that night, but I couldn't remember if I'd spent any more time with them afterwards. Zach had been Tremere, which was clear both from the 'warlock' comment Russell had made and the fact that he'd used Movement of the Mind, an almost exclusively Tremere ability, to float down from the girder he'd been standing on.

Had meeting Zach somehow led to my embrace? I hoped that was the case. I hoped that Malcolm hadn't engineered my embrace the way he'd arranged Jason's. I liked my life, but if I found out that it had been forced upon me, I didn't know how I would feel.

This dream had happened years later than the others, but somehow I knew that I hadn't been that serious about a boyfriend since Marcus had died. Oh, I'd dated, but there hadn't been anyone that important to me. I wondered if Malcolm had still been killing my friends off.

I made myself stop thinking about Malcolm when Nina, Lena and Brenda knocked on the door and we began the process of getting ready for the wedding. Lucy came by a little while later and we had fun together, really. We talked a lot of girl talk and did each other's hair and make up. The long mauve dresses fit everyone perfectly, amazingly enough, and they all looked beautiful.

Frasier lurked outside the bedroom door and Nina kept sending him off on errands just to get him out of our hair. Jason tried to get by the girls once, but Lena gave him a talking to that sent him back downstairs with his ears burning.

Finally Antonio came to tell us it was time to go down. All the groomsmen were waiting in their elegant tuxedos for us to come out, and Lucy led the way toward the stairs in her dainty white gown. The men offered their arms for the women and we walked quietly downstairs to the hall.

Of course Lucy went first, scattering rose petals where the rest of us were to walk. Lena and Mikael went next, and I found it very hard to believe she'd had a baby just a little more than a month ago.

Even Daedelus looked handsome with Nina on his arm, and she didn't seem to mind having been paired with a Nosferatu. Brenda and Graves followed them leaving Antonio and I alone for a moment.

"Be happy, my childe," he told me softly as he bent to kiss my cheek.

"I will, sire," I replied with a smile.

The music cued for our entrance and Antonio led me into the garden. Jason was standing near Stephen looking very handsome. We joined them and Antonio placed my hand in that of my soon to be husband before he stepped back and sat down.

Stephen looked quite seriously between the two of us and spoke a few words about love and devotion. When he asked if anyone had any objection to the wedding, I held my breath, half thinking that Malcolm would do something to stop it. When no one said a word, he looked at Jason.

"Wilt thou take Christina Joanne Strong, here present, for thy lawful wife?" he asked gravely. "To have and to hold for richer and for poorer, for better and for worse, in injury and in health, as long as you both exist?"

"I will," Jason replied firmly.

Stephen turned to me. "Wilt thou take Jason Kline, here present, for thy lawful husband? To have and to hold for richer and for poorer, for better and for worse, in injury and in health, as long as you both exist?"

"I will," I told him, looking into Jason's eyes.

"The rings please," Stephen said to Graves. The monk held them in his hands and spoke a brief blessing over them.

He had us repeat these words over the rings; "I believe in God, the father almighty, creator of heaven and earth. I believe in the Holy Spirit and the communion of Saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting. With this ring, I thee wed."

Stephen put his hand over ours. "By the power vested in me by the almighty," he said solemnly, "I join you in Holy Matrimony. Let no one come between you for all eternity. *In nomine patris, et filii, et spiritu sanctu.* Amen."

He smiled at Jason. "You may kiss the bride."

Jason looked seriously down into my eyes and leaned close for a brief kiss. There was a promise in his eyes that there would be more later, much more. If I were human I would have blushed.

The night before we had set up tables in the garden for dinner, mindful of the fact that we did have those among us that required food. Everyone sat down and Lena made sure that everyone had enough to eat, including the Kindred who preferred blood to the meal made by the villagers.

After everyone who wanted to had eaten, Graves brought out several bottles of champagne. Rafe and Frasier went among the crowd and filled wineglasses for the toast.

Graves stood. "Perhaps not all of you know this, but Jason and Christina's relationship had a rather unique beginning. Two years ago the hotel she was staying in caught fire and Jason went in to save her. She didn't trust him at first, as we all know Christina doesn't give her trust easily."

Many people chuckled at that one and I had to admit he was right. For instance, I still didn't trust Graves.

"Jason and Christina have not had an easy relationship," he continued. "There have been obstacles and separations, but they have worked through their differences. The fact that they are together in spite of the problems that they've had is how I know that their love will endure the test of time."

He turned to look at Jason and I, gesturing for us to stand. "For years I have considered Jason to be the son I never had. This marriage gives me a daughter as well. Welcome to the family, Christina."

I smiled and thanked him, feeling more than a little guilty that I couldn't bring myself to trust him. He knew it too, I could see it in his eyes as he leaned past Jason to kiss my cheek.

Graves and I sat down, but Jason remained standing. He looked around at the gathering of our friends and smiled.

"If you don't mind, I have a few things to say to everyone," he told them. "First of all I'd like to say that Christina and I welcome you here and we're glad that you could join us.

"Almost everyone here knows I was and still try to think of myself as a priest of the Temple of Light. What most of you don't know is that at the time and some time after, I was being trained by some of the best to become a hunter."

I was surprised he was telling everyone this. In fact, his little speech was a total surprise to me.

"It was only after Graves saved me and made me his ghoul that I realized not all Kindred were evil," he continued, smiling down at his friend. "In fact, I now believe that it was my human side that carried more of the beast. But it was also at that time that I started losing touch with God."

"Some time passed and I met the woman who is now my wife, Christina. But a human and a vampire? Then came my downfall: Russia. I was taken for reasons that are still not fully known to me."

I looked down, feeling the burden of guilt on my soul. It was my fault Jason had been embraced. I gave myself a mental shake and told myself not to think of Malcolm tonight as Jason went on.

"It was in that time I was killed and reborn, taken further from the light into the world of darkness. After I was rescued, I went into hiding. At the time I thought I was doing it to hide and protect my friends, then I realized that the only one I was hiding from was myself."

He looked over at Lena and the baby. "About that time I got a call that changed my thoughts, an old friend was in trouble. Well, I'd had enough of feeling sorry for myself and I thought 'I have to help my friend, find Chris to see if she can forgive me'. And by the grace of God when we got to the place we were staying, there she was, standing in the archway with the look we all know, the 'I know and I know you know that I know' look on her face."

That comment brought a few chuckles from the group. I looked at Cormac and Nina, remembering when Jason had come into the holding looking like Graves, but I had seen only the man I loved.

"Well, to make a long story short," Jason said, "we beat the bad guy and saved the girl and her newborn son, and got them back safely. After a drink or so I excused myself and said I would be back, I had to go take care of something."

I frowned. I didn't remember him excusing himself, but then I'd been busy at the time watching Stephen heal Shannon and Lena.

"I headed for the chapel and there before God I asked for his forgiveness for what I had become," he told us. "At that point, still not knowing his plans for me, all I can recall is a blinding force of light hitting me and a pain that could match no other, or so I thought.

"Then I heard the Voice of God telling me he that while he could not restore my human body, he could transform me into what you see before you today, but I would be removed from his sight forever. The thought of being removed from the Lord's eyes hurt more than the pain of my rebirth."

He looked down at me with love in his eyes. "When I awoke I returned to the party only to find that my love was gone, leaving only a note behind. It was then and only then that I understood the true meaning of pain. It wasn't my rebirth, it wasn't being torn from God's eyes. It was a broken heart, the greatest pain of all. I told myself 'I lost her once and I can't do it again'. I had to get her back in my life because she'd never left my heart."

Seeing the love on his face and hearing the echo of his pain made me ashamed that I'd doubted him. Still, I couldn't regret leaving the way I had. If things had been different, I would have always wondered if I meant as much to him as Graves did. Knowing how much more I meant made me start to cry.

"As I look at her this night I now understand what Russia was all about and why I was embraced into the Kindred life," my husband told our friends. "I think we all know John 3:16, 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in him shall not perish, but shall have everlasting life.' I understand now that it was a test for me and Chris, a test of faith and love. I am Kindred, therefore I shall not perish. And with Chris by my side I will have everlasting love."

He turned to me and took my hand, pulling me to my feet beside him. "I now understand my place in this world. It is to stand by your side and love you better than anyone else can. Christina Joanne Kline, I love you with all my heart, with all my soul, with all my being."

Those simple words made me cry in earnest as he kissed me gently. He pulled me into his arms and I held onto him, more grateful to God in that moment than I had ever been in my life.

GIFTS

Trapped in between heaven and hell
He knows all the secrets and don't want to tell
The Beast - Concrete Blonde

Not long after the toast, everyone began to mingle. This was the third night at the holding for most of the guests, and they knew each other well enough by now for there to be no awkward silences.

I spent a good half-hour talking about Thaumaturgy with Victoria and Cormac before Jason came over to lead me away.

"No business tonight," he reminded me with a smile.

It wasn't too long after that I noticed something strange. Stephen and Mikael were moving quickly toward the baby, and they were both in Glabro form, the one that is larger than human, but not quite as frightening as Crinos.

"Hey, what's going on?" I asked Stephen as he passed close to us.

"What?" he murmured, obviously distracted.

"What's going on?" Jason demanded.

"Something." He paused to sniff the air, then added. "Something bad is approaching."

"Could you be a little more vague?" I asked tersely. If something bad was coming, we needed to know what it was so we could fight it.

"From where?" Jason questioned.

"It's coming from outside the holding," Stephen told him. "I believe it's an unseelie."

I knew the unseelie were mischievous fairies, which was bad. I had no idea why one would be coming this way, but it didn't really matter. I turned away from the gathering and pulled up the hem of my dress to reach the Glock 17 I had strapped to my thigh. When I straightened, Jason was grinning at me.

Everyone had gathered near Lena and Christopher except Brenda and Antonio, who were off near the house talking. Lena was handling herself okay, but I could tell she was worried about what was going on.

I looked at the werewolves and attempted to lighten the mood. "Hey, aren't you supposed to wait to shift in front of the baby until it's a little bit older?" They ignored me.

Everyone else had at least one gun pulled, except Eliza who was holding a large knife in one hand and a wooden stake in the other. No one was surprised when the werewolves shifted to Crinos.

"Obviously something is bothering you?" Jason asked softly.

"Satyr," Steven growled, very much prepared to fight.

"Chris, where's your brother?" my new husband asked me. When I pointed in his direction, Jason said to him, "Do you know what's going on?"

Robert looked at him oddly. "There's a satyr coming."

"Other than that," Jason replied impatiently. "Can you do something with dead chickens or something?"

My brother shook his head and turned toward the woods. Everyone turned to see the satyr standing there, holding a package wrapped in silver paper and tied with a red ribbon. He stood nearly as tall as the werewolves, and his skin was blue.

"How do you kill a Satyr?" I whispered softly.

Jason looked down at my wedding gown. "You have something on underneath that, don't you?" He asked, concerned. "You don't want to dirty your dress."

I shot him an amused glance. "You'll find out later," I told him softly. "Let me see your jacket, we wouldn't want to get blood on the wedding dress."

He handed me his jacket as the satyr held up the box toward us. When Jason would have walked toward him, I grabbed his arm and pulled him back.

"Oh, no," I said firmly. "Let someone else get it." I wasn't about to let my husband get killed on our wedding night.

"Graves?" he asked, looking at the Gangrel.

Graves nodded and walked toward the fairy, followed closely by Estrea. He took the box from the satyr and they both returned to us. Graves held the box out to us.

"There was a message with it," he said softly. "It's from his master."

Jason glanced around. "Cormac? Come here quick!"

I raised an eyebrow at him. "If you're thinking Spirit's Touch, I can do it," I told him.

"So can he," Jason pointed out.

I looked down at the box and saw that written across a small card on top was 'Tina and Jason.' "Jesus fucking Christ," I muttered under my breath.

"I heard that," Jason warned.

I ignored him and concentrated on the box.

Graves took the box from the satyr's hands.

The satyr took the box from someone else, probably male, with weathered and raggedy clothing.

"You want to help out with this?" Jason asked Cormac. When I looked up at him, he added, "I'm not saying you can't do it, dear, but two heads are always better than one and I can't do it."

"You doubt me?" I asked him tensely.

"Of course not," he denied quickly.

Cormac looked down at me. "Did you?"

"Yeah," I told him. "I only saw an arm handing it to the satyr."

Cormac reached out and touched the box for a moment, his eyes closed in concentration. "I see nothing more than you have," he said when he pulled his hand away.

From the corner of my eye I saw Stephen shift back to Glabro and start walking toward the satyr.

"Do we want to open the box?" I asked Jason.

"I'm not sure," he murmured, looking at it.

"Antonio?" I looked around, but I didn't see him. "Where's Antonio?"

Jason glanced back toward the house. "I thought he was back with Brenda doing something."

I looked at my brother. "Robert, do you sense anything with this box that tells you we shouldn't open it?"

"Could there be a block spell on it?" Jason added.

Robert looked at the box, but shook his head. "I don't see anything."

"Obviously there's not a ward against Kindred," I murmured.

"Shall we do it together?" Jason suggested. "That way if anything happens it happens to both of us."

Like I could live with myself if anything happened to Jason. "Why don't I do this myself? I don't want anything to happen to you."

He looked at me sternly. "We're not going to go through this a thousand times, okay? We'll get nothing done."

"Right," I agreed. "I'll just do it myself."

"Yeah, right."

I could see he was never going to go for that. "Together then." I took one end of the ribbon while he took the other. Together, we pulled the bow apart.

Jason examined the ribbon carefully before letting it fall away to the ground. He reached for one seam of the wrapping paper and I grabbed another. Very carefully we peeled back the paper to reveal a box with a lid. We lifted the lid away from us and I handed it to Robert. The inside was covered in red satin.

"It's probably not a toaster oven," I said softly.

Jason took out his gun and poked at the satin, but it just sank into the box. He tried to catch a corner of the fabric on the barrel of the gun, but it was too slippery. I reached out and lifted the fabric back. Together we leaned forward and looked into the box. Neither of us liked what we saw.

Lying nestled on the red satin was a severed left hand. On the ring finger was a man's wedding ring identical to the one I'd put on Jason's finger only hours ago. The hand was not fresh, it was withered and dried like it had been stored for years before Malcolm had decided to give it to us.

"I'm getting this really strange sense of déjà vu," I muttered angrily while Jason rubbed his wrist.

Brenda's voice rang out through the courtyard. "Christina!"

"Yeah?" I called back

"Are you all right?"

Was I? "So far," I told her. "And you?" When she didn't answer, I turned to see her arguing with Antonio at the door of the house. "What's going on?"

"Just a minute," she told me.

"I don't think we should accept this," Jason said softly. "I think we should box it back up and have it returned."

He was probably right. Malcolm was just trying to mess with our heads and he was doing a mighty fine job of it. Still, it wouldn't hurt to try a Spirit's Touch on the hand before we gave it back to him.

I reached slowly into the box to touch the hand. The instant I did so, a vision of the Crone hit me square between the eyes. His stringy hair, his withered skin, the 'X' carved in the center of his forehead.

I gasped and dropped the box as I was thrown backward. I landed on my butt on the lawn, and the hand tumbled out of the box to land at my feet.

"Is everyone all right?" Stephen called from his position by the satyr.

After giving me a thorough look, Cormac answered him. "I think so."

I shook my head to try and clear it of the vision, but it kept coming back. Vaguely I knew that Jason and Frasier had knelt beside me, but I couldn't get Malcolm out of my mind.

"Christina?" Brenda called to me.

"I'm all right," I told them all, fighting the headache that Malcolm had left me with.

"What did you see?" Jason asked.

I looked at him irritably. "What do you think I saw?"

"Something ugly," he replied.

"With long stringy hair," I agreed. "And it wasn't Graves." I sat there for a moment looking at the hand that still lay on the ground at my feet.

THE GARDEN

And a shadow like a sadness
Falling all across the garden
Darkening of the Light - Concrete Blonde

How do you like your gift? I heard a voice ask in my head. It was Malcolm.
I don't, I told him strongly.

Jason went over to the hand and picked it up. He put it in the box and glanced around. "Which one of you spooky-boo guys needed something of the Crone's?"

But why, Tina? He sounded hurt, as if he really cared that I didn't like his present. Then I realized that he was quite close, I looked around and saw him standing against the garden wall among the vines that covered it. He looked more like the Malcolm I remembered than Lord Chaos.

I stared at him, amazed that he would not only come this close, but that he would show himself to me. Wasn't he the least bit afraid of a holding full of vampires and werewolves? *Why are you doing this, Malcolm?* I demanded. *Haven't I paid enough?*

"Chris, what's the matter?" Jason asked.

I am trying to make amends, Malcolm told me.

Sure he was. *Is the dreamwalking the other night your way of making amends?*

"Chris?"

Think of it as your final test. He replied.

What, I asked sarcastically, you finally got your share of blood?

Can't you tell? His voice sounded amused, like he knew something I didn't.

I looked for his aura, searching for a reason he would be so confident that we couldn't hurt him. There were sparkles around him as I expected there to be, but to my surprise his aura was lighter than it should have been. Was he Kindred or just ghoulded?

Who'd you kill this time? I demanded as I carefully came to my feet and started walking toward him.

No one you knew, Malcolm told me.

"Chris," Jason prompted beside me. When I didn't answer, he called my name again.

So what, it's over? I asked roughly, trying hard not to lose my temper or start crying. *A final seeking and I've finished paying for something I never did? How many of my friends did you kill because we couldn't save Lizzy?*

It is far from over, dear Tina, he said gruffly. *It isn't because we couldn't save Lizzy, but that we had to try*. The voice in my head got hard and he sounded more like Lord Chaos than I'd ever heard him sound. *Because of you*.

I refused to accept the guilt for something I'd had no control over. I wasn't the monster here. *I didn't kill her!* I screamed at him from my mind. *You killed Marcus!* I turned to reach for a gun from Jason's figure eight.

He would have died from what your father did to him, he snapped at me. I felt him sigh and the anger emanating from him as I pulled the gun clear and he said, *I ended his pain*.

"What!?" I exclaimed aloud. I turned to look back at Malcolm but he was gone. I bit back a curse and looked around for my brother. "Where's Robert?"

Jason put his hand on my arm and I realized that I'd been swinging the gun recklessly. He took the gun from my hand but didn't put it away just yet.

"How closely did you follow what happened in Helena after you died?" I asked Robert who was nearby.

"Not very closely for quite some years," he told me. "I couldn't exactly pop back."

I shook my head and looked at Jason. "We need to go to Sacramento." If Papa really had killed Lizzy and done something to Marcus, I needed to know. Vengeance had a place, as long as it was directed at the right person.

"Sacramento," he repeated, confused. "What do we need to go back there for?"

"To visit the old man," I told him, my voice hard. "Papa."

"You know, he didn't like me last time I met him," Jason reminded me.

"He's not going to like me much this time," I said firmly. If my memories were right, Papa was a dead man.

"I think last time he half didn't like you."

You killed my love, I heard Malcolm whisper in my mind. *I killed yours.*

A shiver ran down my spine and I shook my head to try and get Malcolm out of it. I put a hand on my forehead and concentrated hard to drive him out. I had no way of knowing if I succeeded.

"Is something the matter?" Jason asked, seeing my movement. "You got bugs?"

"Yeah, I got a big bug," I told him harshly, "and he's either ghouled or Kindred now. I wish he'd stay the fuck out of my head." I turned to my brother. "Robert, did you feel him come into the area?"

He looked a little confused. "I had the ward on the house."

That figured. "And we're in the garden."

"Isn't that where you wanted it?" he asked.

"Can't you put some wards on some earrings or something?" Jason demanded.

I shook my head. "Well, I don't think he'll be back tonight." I rubbed my stomach that still felt sore from where Brenda had shot it in my dream. "Let's go back inside the house," I suggested still looking at where my ex-mentor had been standing. At least inside we'd know if Malcolm tried to come after us.

"What did you see?" Jason asked.

"Malcolm," I told him as the others started for the house. "Standing over there in the garden."

"Where?" he demanded.

"Right there," I said, pointing to the spot, "in among those vines."

"Now if you think about it, did you physically see him," he asked, "or just a projection of him?"

"Does it matter?" He'd still invaded my mind.

"Yes," Jason replied, "because if it's a projection of him, he may not be there, he might be doing a spirit walk thing. If it was him, he could be invisible and still be here."

"I don't know if he was here," I said in a low voice. "Tell Cormac to go over and feel the damn wall."

"But I have faith in you," he told me with a smile.

I rolled my eyes. "I don't have patience for this tonight," I told him. Then I took a deep breath and gave him a too sweet smile. "Fine."

"You're closer to him than anyone else here," he reminded me as he followed me over to the wall.

I shot him a dry look, then laid my hand on the wall. Once again my head was filled with visions of Lord Chaos' horrible face and I found myself flying backward. Jason tried to catch me, but ended up on the ground with me on top of him.

Michael walked over and stood looking down at us, his arms crossed and a smug look on his face.

"Don't say it," I warned him irritably.

"Go away," Jason added.

Michael just shook his head and walked away.

"Are they always like this?" I heard Eliza ask softly.

"Yes," Cormac replied. He smiled and took her hand to lead her inside.

I rolled off of Jason and stood up, careful not to step on the dress. I held my hand out for him and helped him to his feet. "Let's go back in the house," I told him, "you know, away from the Crone."

"That's a good idea," he agreed.

"And I need to find other things to think about besides death and killing my father," I added.

He looked down at me in surprise. "Excuse me?"

I shook my head. "I'll explain later. Right now let's just get inside."

As much as I tried to relax, I found it almost impossible. I kept expecting Malcolm to show up or start talking in my head again. Lucy and Michael were scheduled to leave near dawn, and I made sure that Jason and I spent some time with them before the night was over. Eventually I was able to calm down enough to enjoy being with my family and friends, but I never relaxed my guard.

HAPPILY EVER AFTER

Hours of forever, coming all together
At the crossroads of a minute
And you and I were in it
Days and Days - Concrete Blonde

Jason and I retired to our room around three o'clock after some good-natured teasing from our friends. Lena had thoughtfully turned back the covers and left candles and fresh flowers in the room for us.

My husband walked around the room lighting candles as I undressed and climbed into bed. When he joined me, we had the wedding night I'd always dreamed of having.

I guess I shouldn't have been surprised that it was the first time for Jason, after all he had been a priest before his embrace. Together we reached heights I'd never dreamed of before. We fell asleep wrapped in each other's arms and I didn't once worry about Malcolm.

The next evening, most of us gathered in a particularly peaceful section of the garden for Christopher's christening. Stephen had prepared an ornate bowl with holy water inside, and he stood next to it wearing all white with a yellow ceremonial scarf.

He spoke to Jason and me for a few moments before the ceremony. "I want you to know that I will ask a question of the baby and it is your duty as godparents to answer for the baby," he told us, "as he is not able to answer for himself."

I hid a smile. "It would be really creepy if it did."

When the ceremony began, Lena gave the baby to Jason. I stood with him at the font and watched while Stephen touched Christopher's forehead with the holy water.

"Do you renounce the serpent?" he asked the baby as Christopher began to cry.

Jason and I answered as one. "Yes."

"Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body," Stephen advised, "so that you may as blessed present yourself to the almighty and your limbs as weapons of justice, for sins shall not hold dominion over you, since you are not under the law of unrigors.

"Glory be to the almighty Father, Son and Holy Spirit. I baptize thee in the name of the almighty Father, Son and Holy Spirit." He looked out over those who had gathered. "I commend this child Christopher into the capable and loving hands of his parents, for there is no good tree that bears bad fruit, nor is there a bad tree that bears good fruit. Every tree is an unbiased fruit, for from thorns men do not gather figs.

"A good man brings forth from the center of his heart that which is good, for it is out of the abundance of the heart is devotion loaded. Glory be to the almighty Father, Son and Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning, so shall it be ever, and the world without end, amen."

Jason took the baby back to Lena, who was trying to smile through her tears. He kissed the baby on the cheek and grinned at her. "I was kind of waiting for him to say Father, Son, Holy Spirit and Gaia," he quipped, making her laugh.

Once again Lena had refreshments available for us, and we all went in for dinner. Jason and I spent one last night with our friends before we left near dawn, with Frasier driving the cart. A few days later we were in the Caymans, having the vacation that Jason had once promised me what felt like a lifetime ago.

Everything was beautiful in the islands, the weather was warm and the water was cool. The moon shone down on us illuminating our paradise. We walked and talked and swam while Frasier kept watch for us.

I'd never been so happy. In my bliss, it was easy for me to finally believe in the God that Jason had once had so much faith in. Hadn't He blessed us? Hadn't He smiled on our union? Every night I thanked Him for his benevolence to us.

I knew that as sure as the sun would rise, Jason and I would be together forever, always happy, always in love.