



The Corruption of Sarah

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PRELUDE

When I was a child, I loved spooky stories. I read every scary tale I could put my hands on. When I reached puberty, I discovered an obsession for vampires that appalled my parents. I watched every vampire movie that I could find, and hung pictures of them in my room. Every Halloween for five years straight I was a vampire. Bram Stoker was my idol. As I grew older, I outgrew my outward expressions of my fixation, but inwardly I still thrilled to watch a vampire flick.

The day I learned that a vampire killed my parents, that fixation turned to hatred. Yes, vampires exist, but not like they are portrayed in Hollywood or in legends. They call themselves Kindred and hide themselves from human minds, but they exist nonetheless.

I guess I should add that the Inquisition is alive, well, and living in your city. Contrary to popular opinion, it didn't die out with the birth of the Renaissance. They just wanted you to believe it did.

For years I was a member of that organization, now called The Society of Leopold. I participated in many Auto De Fe's, or death hunts, chasing magi and fairies, werewolves and ghosts. I never hunted Kindred because my superiors believed that my extreme loathing for vampires would endanger the search. I have to say that given my current circumstances, they were correct.

Eight years ago Father Abraham came to me in Minneapolis and told me that my parents had died in a car accident on their vacation. He helped me sell the house and found a family to take me in. After my high school graduation six months later, he returned and took me to Boston where I attended Harvard law school. He was my only guest three years later when I graduated in the top five percent of my class. He helped me get into Quantico where I entered the Secret Service.

Five years later Abraham called me in Washington D.C. where I was on a brief vacation from my duties in the Secret Service. He asked me to come to Salem, Massachusetts with him so he could tell me the truth about my parent's deaths.

When I arrived at St. Stephen's church in Salem, Abraham told me that my parents had been members of The Society of Leopold. He said they had spent years hunting vampires and other supernatural creatures, and that it was on one of these hunts that they had been killed.

It took a while for Abraham to convince me that he was telling the truth, but once he did I resigned my commission and joined the Society. My government training prepared me well for the hunt. After spending six months receiving specialized training in Europe, I was assigned to Abraham's team.

St. Stephen's was the Society's front in Salem. Abraham was the Cenaculum leader, and there were six other hunters in the house as well. Knowing that my parents' deaths were caused by vampires had caused a rage within me, and Abraham did his best to keep me away from hunts for them, insisting I limit myself to the other paranormal creatures of the area. And, until recently, I did.

DECEPTION

OOH IT MUST BE MAGIC
HOW INSIDE YOUR EYES I SEE MY DESTINY
I SAW RED - WARRANT

My colleagues and I frequented a large coffee shop downtown called 'The Coven.' It was usually crowded, and drew a variety of people. One night I had given up waiting for Aislynn to meet me there and was getting a coffee for the road when I met the man of my dreams.

I was turning from the counter with my cup when I was jostled from behind. The hot liquid spilled down the front of my sweater and onto the floor. I jerked and quickly held the sweater away from my stomach to stop the burning.

"I'm so sorry," a deep resonant voice told me.

I looked up and couldn't say a word. The man standing before me was very tall; my head barely reached his shoulder. His hair curled around his head in a dark cloud. Hazel eyes penetrated mine and I felt like he could see right through me. He had a light complexion, and full sensuous lips. He seemed vaguely familiar, but I couldn't place where I'd seen him. I blinked to break the spell his eyes had cast over me.

"Let me get you another one of those," he said. He turned to the counter and asked the man to refill my order.

"You don't have to do that," I told him.

"Yes I do. It's my fault you spilled it." He studied the front of my sweater with a frown. "You didn't get burned, did you?"

"No," I assured him.

He turned and grabbed a handful of napkins. "Here. You get your shirt and I'll get the floor."

He handed me a few napkins and dropped to one knee at my feet to clean the floor. I looked down at his head for a moment, then forced myself to concentrate on blotting at the coffee on my sweater.

"Maybe I'd better go in the bathroom and see if I can get this out," I said.

He looked up, his hazel eyes hypnotizing me again. "Right. I'll get your drink for you and wait over there." He pointed to an empty table in the corner. "Is that okay?"

"Sure," I whispered.

Slowly I turned and strode to the ladies room. I dabbed water on the stain thinking that meeting this gorgeous hunk was well worth the cost of the sweater. When I came out he was sitting at the table waiting for me. He stood as I approached.

"I guess I owe you for the sweater," he said. I hadn't been able to get much of the coffee from the fabric.

"It might come out in the wash," I told him, though I doubted it would.

He looked down at me until I began to feel uncomfortable. "Would-would you like to sit down?"

I couldn't tell if his hesitation was because he didn't want me to sit down, or because he was afraid I wouldn't. I nodded and he held my chair for me. He sat down and handed me my cup.

"I'm Micky George," he told me with a smile.

"Sarah Hamilton," I replied.

"I've seen you here before," he said. "You usually come here with friends."

"Yes, the coffee's good and we always have a good time. But I don't think I remember seeing you here."

"I tend to stay in the background," he admitted. He sipped at his coffee. "Are your friends going to be meeting you tonight?"

I shrugged. "I thought one of them would be here by now, but she may have gotten tied up."

"Not literally, I hope," he said with a grin.

For a moment, I couldn't breathe, then I chuckled. "No. On Saturdays, she and most of the others work at the Soup Kitchen downtown. Sometimes there's a big crowd."

"You don't work there?"

"Not on Saturday, I usually work the kitchen during the week, it gives me a better chance to try to talk to some of the people."

"Are you a social worker or something?" he asked.

I shook my head. "My friends and I live at and work for St. Stephen's," I told him.

"I'm afraid I'm not familiar with that," he replied.

"It's a Catholic Church near downtown," I explained. "We do a lot of work with the poor and homeless. We all live on the grounds and do volunteer work at the soup kitchen and several shelters around town. We also offer adult literacy classes among others to help people get up on their feet."

"Sounds interesting," he said, but he seemed a little put off.

"Sounds fanatic," I admitted with a smile, "but these people really need help. It's not what I had planned on doing when I went to college, but the work is very fulfilling."

"What did you go to college for?" he asked.

I laughed.

He smiled back at me. "What? You went to college for humor?"

"I have a degree in Criminology," I told him. "I even worked for the government for a few years before I came here."

"Wow, that must have been interesting." He leaned forward and looked deep into my eyes. "You probably don't use much of what you learned here in Salem."

"You'd be surprised," I said with a small smile.

I glanced at my watch and realized that it was nearly midnight. "I'm sorry, but I really need to go. Father Abraham likes to have everyone in for Midnight Mass on Saturday."

"I enjoyed talking to you, Sarah," Micky told me. "I'm almost glad I spilled your coffee all over you."

"I am too," I replied.

"Can you, that is, would you like to meet some other time?" he asked intently. "Maybe go for a movie or dinner?"

I felt joy bloom in my heart. I found Micky very attractive, very sweet. I liked him a lot and I was glad that he seemed to like me too.

"I would love to," I said.

"How about tomorrow night? There's a nine o'clock showing of *Bell, Book and Candle* at the Duplex Cinema."

I frowned. "Is that a new release?" I asked. "It doesn't sound familiar."

"Actually, it's an old one," he said. "I'm a freak for old movies. There's a little bar across from the theatre, would you like to meet there? Say, eight o'clock?"

"Sure."

He smiled at me and for a moment I could only stare.

"I'll see you then," he said. He took my hand and brought it to his lips where he kissed it gently.

I flushed. "Tomorrow, then. Good night."

"Good night."

I floated out of the coffee shop.

I didn't tell anyone about meeting Micky. Father Abraham didn't like anyone in the house to date outside of the Cenaculum, as there was too much of a chance in Salem that the date would end up prey. I knew this, but I had felt such a connection with Micky that I didn't care.

I spent Sunday attending mass and studying in the library upstairs. I readied myself with care and left the house quietly at seven forty five. I parked down the street from the theatre and walked to the bar that Micky had told me about.

I went in and didn't see him so I walked to the bar and ordered a soda, then sat down at a table with my back to the wall.

The crowd was rather rough and I felt very out of place in my pale linen pantsuit. A few of the male patrons gave me the eye, but I wasn't afraid. I knew I could handle myself even unarmed, but I had the added backup of my Glock in its holster at the small of my back. Like a good credit card, I never left home without it.

Right at eight o'clock, Micky walked through the door. Immediately heat swept through my body. I didn't understand what about him attracted me so, but I knew that something did.

He spotted me quickly and walked over to sit down.

"Hey," I said with a smile. I felt better about having dressed up a little when I saw that he had.

"Hey." He grinned. "Have you been waiting long?"

"Only a few minutes," I replied.

He glanced around the room. "I'd forgotten how rough this place was or I wouldn't have asked you to meet me here," he apologized.

I shrugged. "I've been in worse."

The waitress came over and he ordered a drink. We sat and talked companionably, and I felt more at ease with him than I had with anyone since my parents' death. When it neared nine o'clock, he took my arm and led me across the street. He paid for my ticket and led me into the depths of the theatre.

The movie was a good one and I enjoyed plot, even though it portrayed witchcraft in a positive light. I was used to that in Salem, Wiccan capital of America, but I knew that true magicians had nothing to do with the fantasy world they are often portrayed in.

The heroine of the movie had many African artifacts in her shop, and I commented during the credits that I had always been interested in anthropology. Micky said that he was also interested in it and told me about some artifacts he had at his apartment.

"I'm afraid it would sound too much like a pick up line if I asked you to come over and see them," he said as we rose and walked up the ramp toward the exit.

"No," I protested, "unless you meant it to be a pick up line."

He looked at me intently, then stood to lead me up the aisle. "Would you want it to be?"

My pulse jumped, but I made an effort to keep my voice calm. "I don't think so," I replied honestly. "I don't know you very well. You might bite."

He stumbled on the carpet in the dimness of the theater but righted himself quickly. "I might," he teased. "You certainly look good enough to eat."

I flushed as we reached the lobby.

"I don't mean to frighten you, if you came over to see the masks, I promise not to bite." He grinned down at me, then added, "Tonight."

I laughed and agreed to go with him.

He told me his apartment was close by and we walked the few blocks there. He lived on the fourth floor of a renovated brownstone. We rode the elevator up and in the close quarters I was very aware of his masculinity.

His apartment was sparsely furnished in a modern style. The living room held an overstuffed leather sofa and a low table stood between it and a large television. The far wall was nearly covered with shelves that held an odd assortment of items from African masks to sixties memorabilia.

He offered me a glass of wine and I accepted. He went into the kitchen and I studied the various objects on display. Micky returned to the room just as I was reaching for an elaborately carved ivory urn.

"Don't do that," he stated harshly, putting his hand in front of me to stop me. The wineglass in his hand nearly tipped, but he recovered quickly.

I stepped back, surprised at the tone of his voice.

"I'm sorry, Sarah," he said with a smile, "it's just that there's a legend about the urn and I have to admit I'm a bit superstitious."

I smiled and took the glass that he offered me. "A legend?"

"Yes," he explained, "it seems the original owner was a sorcerer in the Middle Ages who lived in Italy. He was in love with a beautiful woman who was far beyond his station. He enchanted this urn to make her fall in love with him but she died before he could give it to her. Legend has it that any woman who touches the urn will fall helplessly in love with the next man she sees."

"And you *didn't* want me to touch it?"

He led me down the wall to the African masks. "I want you to love me for who I am, not because you're obligated to."

Micky changed the subject by talking about the masks. I soon forgot the urn and we had a very enjoyable time discussing the merits of tribal society. Eventually we sat down on the couch and he kept our glasses filled while we talked.

Since I didn't often drink, I quickly grew tipsy from the wine. I kept thinking that I'd seen Micky before, but I couldn't put my finger on where.

He was very intelligent, very interested in my opinion. He made me feel beautiful just by the way he looked at me. He was funny, and I laughed more than I could remember laughing in years.

At one point my hair fell across my face. Micky reached up and pushed it behind my ear, then ran his hand down my cheek. I looked up to see him staring down at me intently.

"Why do you carry a gun, Sara?" he asked softly.

I blinked in surprise: I knew that my weapon wasn't obvious by any means, I'd worn the clothing I had on into many places I wasn't supposed to be armed and no one had suspected I was carrying a gun.

"How—"

"I've noticed everything about you," he told me. His hand whispered across my cheek again and I couldn't take my eyes from his lips.

"Would you shoot me if I tried to kiss you, Sarah?" he whispered.

Heat suffused my body and I couldn't answer.

"Would you?"

Slowly, I shook my head.

Slowly, he leaned forward and touched his lips to mine.

Hot fingers of desire wrapped around my body and surrounded my heart. I had been kissed before, but I had never reacted like this.

Gently his lips parted mine and I felt his tongue enter my mouth. With lingering care, he explored the depths of my mouth. I felt the heat of my response and moaned.

My arms traveled around his neck and his hands ran down my spine. He moved closer to me until I was pressed back against the cushions of the couch. I became lost in the sensations washing over me.

His hand brushed against the hilt of my gun, then moved down my hip. His fingers burned a trail down my thigh and I pulled him closer to me, wanting so much more from him.

Abruptly he pulled away and I gasped at the chill he left behind.

He ran his fingers through his hair and sat back on the couch. "I'm sorry, Sarah," he whispered. "I didn't bring you here for this."

I took a deep breath and put my hand on his. "You don't have to be sorry, Micky," I replied softly. "You did ask."

He looked at me and smiled.

I drew in a quick breath and had to look away. I glanced at my watch to see that it was nearly one in the morning.

"It's late," I said. "I should go, I have a long day tomorrow."

"Will I see you again, Sarah?" he asked softly.

"Yes." I knew I shouldn't, but he was just too good to be true.

"When?"

I looked up at him. "Well, I'm pretty busy this week, but I'll be free Wednesday and Saturday. Which is better for you?"

He smiled again. "Both."

I laughed softly.

He wanted to go to dinner in Boston on Wednesday and I agreed to meet him at same bar at seven o'clock. He kissed my cheek as I left.

I drove back to St. Stephen's and lay awake in my bed remembering the kiss. Although I wasn't a prude, I'd never found a man who made me want to sleep with him until now. I couldn't understand my attraction to him, but felt it just the same.

After dinner that Wednesday, we returned to his apartment. While he was in the kitchen making coffee, I approached the display shelves and studied the urn Micky hadn't wanted me to touch. I remembered the legend he'd told me and smiled.

I had seen many unusual things in my time with the Society, but I'd never heard of a spell that lasted for centuries. And, I thought to myself, even if it did, Micky seemed like the exact guy that I should be helplessly in love with.

I reached out and ran my finger down the intricate carvings on the side of the urn.

Instantly I felt something rush through my body. I gasped as the room spun around me and stepped back so I wouldn't fall on the shelves.

Without warning, Micky's hands were on my waist to steady me. I turned and looked up at him, then gasped at the expression on his face.

For a moment, rage filled his features, but it was gone so quickly that I thought I'd imagined it. I pulled back from him, and he released me without hesitation.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

I felt foolish for touching the urn, so I lied. "I tripped and almost fell into your collection," I told him.

He glanced at the urn, then looked down at me with doubt in his eyes, but he didn't press the subject. He went back into the kitchen for the coffee and I sat down on the couch.

I didn't understand what had happened when I'd touched the urn. I felt light-headed, but strangely strong. I was aware of a longing for something I couldn't comprehend.

When Micky came back into the room, my touching the urn seemed inconsequential and I tried to put it from my mind.

That night he didn't even try to kiss me.

Micky and I went on dates several times a week, whenever my duties at the Cenaculum didn't interfere. Most nights we went back to his apartment afterward, but I made sure to stay away from the mysterious urn. Sometimes he would hold me in his arms and kiss me; each time I longed for something more.

I made an effort to go out with my colleagues at least once a week so they didn't become suspicious. Still, Aislynn noticed a difference in my demeanor, and asked me if I'd been dating Jacob, who had offered to take me out several times since I'd been in Salem. I told her that I had simply found an inner balance and it helped me to relax.

Several times during the next month, I participated in Auto De' Fe's with the Cenaculum. Once we traced an insane mage to a house on the lower west side of town and Zane was forced to kill him when the mage called fire down upon us. Another evening I helped Father Abraham perform an exorcism at a restaurant down town.

Once I had to cancel a date with Micky due to a last minute meeting of The Black Rose, a local Wiccan coven I belonged to. Aislynn, whose cousin was in the group, had suggested I join them months earlier to see if I could find actual magic users, but I'd been disappointed. Abraham had insisted I remain with them in case something real turned up and, as I enjoyed the company, I did.

Micky never wanted to be where the spotlight was, and I was just as glad that he didn't. Many of the popular hangouts in town were Kindred or Mage owned and, given my employment, it was best for me to stay away from them.

He told me he was a salesman for a local herbal company and that he drove all over several states selling their products. This explained his unavailability during the day, and I never really questioned him too closely about it. I was more relieved that he didn't ask me about my gun again or why I put so many hours into what was supposedly a low paying public service position.

He was the perfect gentleman, the perfect host, the perfect date, and the perfect kisser. Our entire relationship was entirely too perfect to be real.

THE BLACK ROSE

NO ONE TOLD ME THAT THE GODS BELIEVE IN NOTHING
SO WITH EMPTY HANDS I PRAY
HAND TO MOUTH - GEORGE MICHAELS

On Halloween I was with The Black Rose in a Boston park performing the Samhain sabbat ritual when a vampire came calling. Of course, no one realized she was a vampire, no one except me. She was very beautiful and had a way about her that made everyone present gape in awe. I believe I was the only one who saw through her little trick.

The Kindred particularly affected Rachel, the coven priestess. She kept calling the woman 'Mother' as if she were the Goddess herself. As the woman talked and looked like a God, perhaps Rachel really believed she was.

The vampire toyed with Rachel and the others, pretending anger when Rachel didn't have a specific question for her. She demanded the coven to meet the following evening and to have an explicit question for the 'mother' to answer. Rachel was very contrite, almost servile, and it was then that I realized what the woman truly was.

I was disgusted and must have glared at the vampire with that disgust and no little hatred in my eyes for as soon as the first vampire walked away, another stood directly before me.

He smiled evilly. I saw his teeth and knew that he was Kindred. He was tall and handsome and his dark gaze both terrified and infuriated me.

"Be careful," he whispered. "Hatred can eat you alive."

He was gone as rapidly as he had appeared.

I looked around hastily but saw only the coven members. Abraham called the quickness of vampires 'Celerity' and claimed that not all Kindred had the trait. He told us that vampire society had different clans and that they each had different abilities.

Quickly I melted into the trees in the direction I had seen the female vampire take. Although I was not as fast as the vampires had been, I was able to catch up with the pair in a few minutes.

The woman seemed to be upset about something and the man followed at a distance. They left the park and he followed her into a convenience store nearby.

I slipped out of my ceremonial garb and wrapped it into a ball. When the pair left the store I followed them back into the park and watched as they fed from the two men and one girl from the coven who had apparently stayed behind to clean up.

I was horrified, but I knew my gun would be useless against them. I nearly gagged when I watched the male bite open his own wrist and feed Vivian his blood. When I had recovered myself, they had disappeared.

I followed in the direction I thought they had gone and quickly found them getting into a cab at the park's edge. I ran back to my car which was parked nearby and followed them discretely to an expensive restaurant on the waterfront of Boston.

I sat in my car and waited for them to emerge. About an hour later, I saw them come out with another couple. The woman was very beautiful, dark skin and black eyes.

In disbelief I realized that the man accompanying her was Micky! I stood in the shadows and watched as he climbed into the limousine after the others. I shook off the shock I felt and followed them to a large hotel downtown. The two vampires went into the hotel and the limousine pulled away.

I waited in the parking lot for the sun to come up, and then I entered to hotel. I walked out a few minutes later with the vampires' names: Michael Moore and Brenda Thompson.

As I drove back to Salem I pondered Micky's association with the vampires. I refused to believe he was one, and I couldn't figure out what he would have been doing with the blood-sucking leaches. Exhausted and unable to come to any logical conclusion, I parked in the lot behind the Cenaculum and climbed the stairs to the second floor and my room where I fell into bed and an exhausted sleep.

I woke early the next afternoon and went to speak with Father Abraham. I gave him my notes from the previous night and told him everything I could remember. I made no mention of Micky.

"I don't think I want you to be involved with this," he said quietly. "I know how you feel about these monsters and I would hate to have you let your feelings affect your judgement. Stay with the coven and I'll put Zane on the trail of this Michael and Brenda."

When I would have protested, he leaned back in his chair and looked at me sharply. "I mean what I say, Sarah. Stay away from those Kindred."

I couldn't argue with him for he had always been so kind to me. I kissed his cheek and went upstairs to the workout rooms. As I approached my room a few hours later, I found Jacob coming out of his.

Jacob and I had become close friends over the last few years, and I was aware that he cared deeply for me although he had never stated that fact aloud.

"Hey," he said.

I smiled. "Hey."

"Any luck last night?"

"Well, not with the witches," I replied, "but I did see a couple of blood suckers."

"Really?" he asked excitedly. "Abraham says their queen called in a couple of new ones last night."

After a few more minutes of conversation, I excused myself to clean up for dinner. I took a moment to try calling Micky's apartment, but there was no answer.

I met the coven in the park just after sundown but it turned out to be a long cold night. Neither Brenda nor Michael showed up and the majority of the coven believed that the previous night's visitation had been some type of mass hallucination. Rachael pleaded with them to stay but toward morning she and I were the only ones left in the park.

"We must have done something wrong," Rachel said quietly. "The Mother must still be angry with us. Tomorrow night we will try again." She looked up at me, misery shining in her bright eyes. "Will you come tomorrow and wait with me?"

"If I can, Rachael," I replied as I walked her to her car.

I drove back to the Cenaculum weary and heart sore. I had so much wanted to see the demons again despite what Father Abraham had said. I wasn't sure what I would have done, but I felt I would have been able to do something. Perhaps I would have gotten a clue as to why Micky had been with them the previous night.

I went into the library where I found Jacob going through a few ancient manuscripts. When he heard me come in he looked up.

"What do you know about Gargoyles?" he asked.

"Weren't they used on buildings to ward off evil spirits?" I questioned as I sat down.

"I think they could be a bit more than that," he replied slowly. "I saw one downtown tonight leaving the Witchcraft Museum."

"A Gargoyle? Leaving?"

"Yes."

I laughed softly. "It is Halloween, you know."

He nodded. "I realize that, Sarah, but if this was a costume then I'm a werewolf."

Jacob was an experienced hunter, and I had to believe he knew what he was talking about. We spent the next few hours researching gargoyles and only found a few references to them being minions of one of the vampire clans. Finally we gave up and retired to our separate rooms to sleep.

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CAPTURE

I ONCE WAS LOST, BUT NOW I'M JUST BLIND
COWBOY - KID ROCK

The next evening I asked Jacob to accompany me to meet Rachael in the park. When we couldn't find her I became worried and we sat on one of the benches to determine what to do next.

A car pulled up and Brenda got out with a man. With a start, I realized that it was Micky. I didn't like to think what this could mean. Had he been captured? Hypnotized? Changed?

Quickly I put my arms around Jacob's neck and pulled his face close to mine.

"Kiss me," I whispered. "We're in trouble."

Jacob put his arms around me and kissed me passionately. I responded as best I could until I heard their footsteps fade away, then I pulled away from him.

"We need to leave," I urged. "I don't think Rachael is here and I don't want the vamp to recognize me." I didn't want Micky to recognize me either.

Jacob agreed.

We drove to the house on Elm Street and parked about a block away from it. About twenty minutes later, Brenda and Micky pulled into the drive and entered the house.

"This is getting dangerous," Jacob whispered to me. "Maybe we should leave this to Zane."

"Let's give it a few minutes," I argued. I was very concerned about Micky and hoped to find a way to get him out of that house. "A half hour more, then we'll leave and I promise I won't ask you to come back." I couldn't share my concerns with Jacob without revealing that I had broken a firm Cenaculum rule. Also, I didn't think Jacob would understand that I had been dating another man.

Jacob reluctantly agreed. While we waited, we discussed the new information Zane had given Abraham about the city's vampires. I was interested to note that an outsider had killed the old queen and wondered if it had been the Michael I had seen.

Twenty-five minutes later a man came out of the house and began walking down the street toward the bay. He appeared to be human and very distracted.

"Maybe we should talk to him," Jacob suggested, "warn him about his friends."

"Maybe he's one of them," I said.

"Are you armed?"

"Of course."

"Then lets talk to him," Jacob urged. "If he is one of them, there are two of us. We should be able to handle it."

Jacob pulled away from the curb slowly and we followed the man with out lights off until we were well out of sight from the house. When the man stopped to look at his watch under a street lamp, Jacob parked the car at the curb a few feet away. We both got out and approached the man.

"How are you this evening, good sir," Jacob began.

The man looked up at us distantly, as if just realizing we were there.

"Fine," he replied. "What can I do for you?"

"We noticed you were out walking and wondered if you needed a ride somewhere. This isn't exactly the safest neighborhood to be in," Jacob told him.

The man smiled. "I was told this was one of the safest neighborhoods in Salem."

"There have been problems lately," Jacob replied softly. "People have fallen."

Fallen? I didn't understand why he would word it like that.

"I'm just taking a walk," the man replied. His long dark hair blew softly across his face in the breeze from the harbor and he swept it back over his shoulder.

I noticed that lace peeked out from his sleeve and it struck me that the man was dressed in very out of date clothing. Also, while the temperature was in the low forties, the man didn't seem to be bothered by the cold. A chill ran down my spine.

"If you won't go with us," I interjected, "perhaps you will allow us to accompany you."

I tried to catch Jacob's eye and alert him to my suspicions about the man, but he never looked my way.

"Of course," the vampire said. He turned to walk down the street and Jacob and I fell into step on either side of him.

A moment later Jacob was on the ground and I was held in an iron grip. I fought desperately, but the Kindred we had been talking to had one arm around my neck cutting off my air supply and the other around my waist holding me immobile.

I clawed at the arm about my neck, but it was like clawing at steel. I couldn't get to the gun in its holster in the small of my back and I couldn't get away. I was held, absolutely.

I looked up to see Michael standing before me. I felt waves of awe overtake me and struggled to turn my head away. Roughly Michael grabbed my chin and forced me to look up at him.

"Relax," he purred.

His gaze caught me and, unwillingly, I stopped fighting. I became limp in the other Kindred's arms. A part of my mind screamed for me to fight, but I could not.

"You can let go of her now, Antonio," Michael said.

Antonio's arms released me and I tried to run, but instead I collapsed to the ground. I knew I was caught in a much stronger grasp than what that had held me before when Michael crouched beside me and smiled.

"You were wrong to come here, weren't you?" he asked smugly.

"Yes," I answered despite myself. "We were wrong."

"And you now realize the error of your ways, don't you?"

I closed my eyes and turned away from his intense gaze. "We were foolish," I whispered.

After a moment Michael picked me up and carried me back to Jacob's car. He put me on the floor in the back and commanded me to 'stay.' I couldn't move.

I heard movement and the trunk closing. Then the vampires got into the front of the car and we drove away. I fought to move, to make some sound, but I was frozen.

We drove for twenty minutes until I was completely disoriented. The car pulled into some kind of garage and I heard an overhead door close as Michael turned the car off.

I had no idea where we were. When Michael opened the back door of the car and looked down at me a silent tear fell from my eye. He ordered me to get out and against my will, I did so. I fought to break away, but I had no control.

Michael took my arm in a bruising grip and led me across the garage. I watched him push on a section of the wall before us and a hidden door opened. Darkness met my eyes and for the first time, I was able to pull away from him.

Before I could take advantage of my freedom, Michael grabbed my shoulders and turned me to look at him. Again, his gaze caught me in some kind of spell.

"Obey me," he demanded harshly. He grabbed my arm and turned me back to the darkness beyond the open door.

"Walk," he commanded, and as I stepped forward I realized the darkness hid a flight of steps.

He led me down the stairs and into hell.

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MICHAEL

I'LL NEVER KNOW JUST HOW I MADE IT OUT ALIVE
BUT WHEN I LOOK IN THE FUTURE I LOOK THROUGH A DIFFERENT EYE
AGENT GREEN - METAL CHURCH

I could see nothing in the darkness, but Michael seemed to know the way. We reached the bottom of the steps and made several turns yet I never felt a wall. After what seemed like a lifetime, he reached out and opened a panel in front of us. I blinked at the brightness that shone on me and brought a hand up to cover my eyes.

Michael tugged my arm and hauled me down a brightly-lit hallway. We turned a corner and he stopped before a closed door.

The door was made of steel and had a viewing window through which I could see a grim cell that was devoid of any warmth, human or otherwise. Michael opened the door and shoved me inside. I fell against the cot and barely stopped myself from tumbling to the floor.

He stood in the doorway and glared down at me. I brushed my hair out of my eyes and glanced up. One glance was all it took.

"Stand upright," he ordered me, "and absolutely still."

I fought the tears that threatened as I obeyed him.

He lifted me easily and set me down in the middle of the cell. He walked around me and studied every inch of my body. I felt my face grow warm with embarrassment but I couldn't move; it was as if I stood wrapped in a block of ice.

After a moment Michael reached out and slid my jacket off my shoulders. As it fell to the floor he walked behind me, pulled my gun from its holster, and threw it on the cot. I looked down at it with longing but couldn't move to get it.

Michael moved back to stand before me and slowly unbuttoned my shirt. He sneered at me as tears fell down my cheeks. Soon my shirt joined my jacket at my feet.

The thin tank top I wore did nothing to hide either my breasts or the knife between them. Michael's fingers brushed against my skin while he reached for the knife hilt and slid it lingeringly from its hiding place. I shuddered as he tossed the blade beside the gun.

The room was cold and I felt my nipples tighten while Michael undid the button of my jeans. He grinned at me as he unzipped my pants and slid them down my legs.

"Lift your foot," he instructed me.

When I did so, he pulled off my boot and held it upside down. My snub nosed revolver hit the ground with a thud and he tossed it onto the cot with my other weapons.

Soon I stood before him in my tank top and underpants. He grinned down at me almost boyishly before taking my clothes and my weapons and walking out of the room.

Before I had time to wonder what I was supposed to do next, Michael returned. He stood quite close to me and looked down into my eyes. Helpless, I looked back.

"Why did you follow me?" he demanded.

I couldn't help but tell him the truth. "You pissed me off," I said quietly.

He laughed harshly and a change came over his face. "Well, now you've pissed me off," he told me. "Don't you know it's not smart to mess with my kind?"

"Yes," I whispered, "I know."

Michael grabbed my shoulder and spun me to face a nearby wall. He pushed me up against it and it was only at the last second I was able to turn my head before my nose smashed into

the concrete. The cement was cold and rough against my body and I shivered helplessly in Michael's grip.

He pulled me away from the wall about a foot and kicked my feet apart. He raised my arms over my head and pressed my palms to the concrete above me.

"Stay still, Sarah," he whispered into my ear.

I jumped at the sound of my name on his lips, but was unable to turn and look at him. I felt like a criminal as he ran his hands lightly down my arms, raising gooseflesh everywhere he touched me.

His fingers circled my waist and dug in painfully while he pulled my body against his. I felt the imprint of his suit buttons in my back and the whisper of his mustache on my ear. With his chin he swept my hair to one side and bared my neck to his caress.

I felt his lips touch my skin softly as his hands moved up my ribcage, brining my tank top with them. Slowly he pulled the shirt over my head and up off my arms before dropping it to the floor at our feet. I closed my eyes and rested my forehead against the cool cell wall while his hands moved back down my arms and across my bare breasts.

I recognized the feel of teeth against the skin of my neck and tensed for the pain I was sure would come. Michael's fangs sank into my flesh and to my surprise elation washed over me. I felt completely helpless, completely in his control as he drained the blood from my body. It was absolute power and weakness, agony and bliss, hatred and love.

Then Michael's teeth withdrew and I sagged in his arms. His hands continued to caress my body and I was humiliated by my inability to fight him. I felt his tongue drag across the skin of my neck. When he turned me to face him, I began to cry once more.

"Forget," he whispered into my eyes, but I could not.

Michael sat me down on the edge of the cot and left the room.

I heard the lock turn and slid to the floor, blindly reaching for my shirt. My hands shook wildly as I pulled it over my head and slid the thin fabric down to my waist. I felt my neck but, to my surprise, there were no wounds.

My mind was in agony and I sank down even further until my cheek was pressed against the cold floor of the cell. Tears spilled from my eyes to pool beneath me and I wondered why I hadn't fought him. For years I had despised Kindred, had dreamed about destroying their evil. It had taken Michael only moments to overcome my hatred and control my mind. I dashed away my tears and sat up to look around the cell.

The walls were made of reinforced concrete, I could tell by the metal peeking from the paint beneath the cot. I shivered with apprehension as I realized the cell was probably strong enough to hold a supernatural occupant, let alone a mere mortal like me.

The cell was eight feet by six feet, with the ceiling made of the same material as the walls. In one corner stood a sink-toilet combination made of stainless steel. Along the opposite wall was a bare cot with a lone pillow. It was quite charmless.

I stood and walked over to the door. My reflection stared back at me from the window and somehow I knew I was being watched. Near the bottom of the metal door was a small access panel, probably to slide in food and other supplies to the cell's captive.

Across the room near the ceiling was a metal cage that held a small video camera. I stared into its empty eye for a moment and wondered who was on the other end of its electronic cord.

When I was convinced that there could be no escape from the cell, I went to the cot and sat down against the wall. I held the pillow against my stomach and pulled my knees up to my chin.

I had been trained by my government and the Society of Leopold to extricate myself from dangerous situations, but nothing had prepared me for this. The Society tells us that when Kindred catch an operative, that person is as good as dead. I couldn't figure out why I was still alive. I told myself I could handle whatever questioning they put me through, but then I remembered Michael. If he could control me so easily, how could I resist questioning?

I wiped my tears and told myself that I would have to do my best. I slid down to kneel by the cot and bowed my head in prayer. After a time, I slept.

When I awoke many hours later, I was weak and disoriented. For a few minutes, I had no idea where I was or how I had gotten there. As I shivered in the cold and sat up, it all came back to me.

I washed my face in the stainless steel sink, then rinsed out my mouth and eased my thirst.

I returned to the cot and noticed a tray of food by the door. My stomach growled but I knew I couldn't take the chance that they hadn't drugged the food. I glanced around the cell desperately for a way out of my prison, but I knew there was no escape.

I had no idea what time it was, but I felt as if I had slept forever. I wondered for the first time what had happened to Jacob, whether he was still alive. I tried in vain to come to grips with what had happened to me.

I looked at the food again. There was no way I could be sure it was free from contamination. I tried to put it out of my mind, but I hunger gnawed at my insides. By my estimation, I had not eaten in nearly twenty-four hours.

I was hungry, dizzy and weak from loss of blood. I closed my eyes and prayed for a way out of the nightmare I found myself in. After a while, I drifted back into sleep.

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MITCH DENZOL

MY MOUTH IS STILL WET FROM OUR LAST KISS.
WAS LOVING ME YOUR ONE INTENTION?
NO EXPLANATION - PETER CETERA

I woke suddenly to the sound of the lock turning. I jumped to my feet and faced the door, unmindful of my state of undress. My heart raced in fear as it swung open. In the first moment, I was glad the intruder wasn't Michael; in the next, I realized it was Micky.

He closed the door softly behind him before turning to me.

In my relief to be rescued, I forgot my suspicions about him. I didn't understand what he was doing there but at that point I didn't care.

"Micky! How did you find me?" I said. "We have to get out of here!" I tried to move past him, but he grabbed my arm to stop me.

"You can't leave, Sarah," he said gently.

"What?" I demanded. I tried to pull my arm away from him, but he didn't let go. "You came to get me out, didn't you? There are creatures here you don't know anything about, we have to go now!"

"I know, baby," he said sadly.

I stared up at him in confusion. "What are you saying?"

He sighed softly and released my arm. "Sit down and we'll talk."

I backed away from him and studied his face. "Talk about what? What's going on?"

"Sarah," he said softly and gestured toward the cot, "come and sit down." His voice was deep and melodious, and I felt compelled to do as he asked, but I fought against the urge and remained standing.

"Micky, I know you won't believe this but there is a vampire here and he will kill us if we don't leave," I explained. I didn't know what time it was, but I knew it had to be late afternoon at the earliest. "We have to be gone before sundown!"

"The sun is already down, Sarah, and Michael won't be back. If I'd known you were here, he would have put you in the cell and not come back the first time."

"How do you know his name?" I asked slowly. "If you'd known I was—" Suddenly it sank in that he wasn't going to help me. Finally I remembered seeing him with Brenda and it occurred to me *why* he wouldn't help.

I backed away from him. Fear choked my throat and I felt as if my heart had been torn from my chest. I couldn't believe that I had been stupid enough to trust this man, this creature. I had even begun to believe that I loved him.

He saw the untouched tray by the door and frowned.

"Why didn't you eat?" he demanded.

I blinked in surprise at his concern and didn't think to lie. "I couldn't be sure it was safe."

He looked disgusted. "Do you really think I would hurt you?"

I raised an eyebrow at him and met his gaze despite the fear I felt. "Why not? You're one of them, aren't you?"

He looked down at me and for a moment, I thought I saw pain flash in his eyes. Then I remembered what he was and tried to close my heart against him.

"Come and sit down, Sarah," he urged as he sat on the cot.

Against my will and better judgement I found myself moving to sit beside him. He looked at me compassionately, then pulled me onto his lap. Before I could struggle he laid me across his lap with my head in the crook of his arm and pressed something cold to my lips.

I jerked away and looked at the meat in his hand.

"Sarah," he told me softly, "I need you healthy. You must eat or you will make yourself sick."

Amazed at his words, I stared at him in silence.

"Eat," he whispered.

I felt helpless to resist and allowed him to put the meat in my mouth. After he had fed me several bites of food, he held a glass of juice to my lips. I drank deeply and after a moment he put the glass down and reached for more food.

"Shouldn't you be a bit more cruel? Michael is a much more effective fiend." I told him bitterly as he lifted a piece of cheese to my lips.

Micky stiffened and I saw rage flash in his eyes before he controlled himself.

"I wouldn't call keeping you in a cell or letting Michael bite you being nice," he replied, "but it is better than the alternative."

"Which is?" My hunger raged and I took the cheese from his fingers eagerly.

"Death."

Surprised, I looked at him. "Aren't you just going to kill me anyway?"

"Not as long as you cooperate, Sarah," he told me, his eyes burning into mine. "I need you. We could help each other, you and I."

"I can't imagine that you would need my help," I said coldly even as I took the next bite from his fingertips.

"You have information that I require," he admitted.

I paused in the act of chewing and dropped my eyes. "I'm afraid I've never been privy to any government secrets, Micky."

"I know that you belong to the Society of Leopold," he told me. "I know that you and your friends hunt and kill supernatural creatures."

I straightened painfully in his grasp and refused to answer him.

"Sarah," he prompted.

"You want me to betray my colleagues," I bit out.

"Betray is a strong word, Sarah. I just want you to keep me informed." He lifted the juice glass again to my lips. "Information is a small price to pay for what I can give you."

I pushed the glass away. "What can you give me?" I demanded.

"Wealth, power," he said, "anything you wish, even eternal life."

I took a deep breath to calm myself and tensed in his arms. "Can you give me my parents back?" I asked softly. "Can you give me my life back as it was before I met you?"

He sighed and sat the glass back down on the tray. "I can't give you your life back, Sarah," he said sadly. "It wasn't supposed to happen like this, but when you followed Michael, you chose this path. There is nothing I can do but make it as painless as possible."

"Painless?" I gasped in anger. In a quick motion I rolled out of his lap and darted to the door. I had hoped it would be unlocked while Micky was with me, but it wasn't. I hit and pushed at it in frustration.

"A demon like you killed my parents! I won't help you! Let me go!" I exclaimed. I turned and began to pound on the door. "Let me out!"

"A Kindred killed your parents?" he asked softly, regret in his voice.

"They're dead and I hate all of you for it!" I began to cry and sank to my knees in front of the door. I hit the door one last time in despair. My hands felt bruised and sore. "Please, kill me or let me go!" I cried desperately.

"I didn't personally kill your parents," Micky told me, "you do know that, don't you?"

"Your kind did," I whispered.

"Look at me," he said softly. When I'd turned my head, he added, "Come here."

Again, I had no choice but to obey.

He took my hands and pulled me to my knees before him. "I can care for you in ways you cannot even imagine," he declared sincerely.

"Care for me?" I demanded in amazement.

"Care for you," he repeated, "and I only ask two things."

"Information," I spat.

"Yes, information," he agreed, "about yourself, about the Society and about vampires."

"You already know about vampires," I replied with suspicion.

"Yes, but I don't know what you or the Society knows about vampires," he told me as he softly caressed my wrists. "I need you, Sarah, and if you don't help me, you'll die."

I pulled back a little and dropped my eyes to his chest. "You said two things," I demanded, "what's the other one."

His grip on my hands tightened and he nodded toward the door.

I heard the door open and fought to free myself from Micky's relentless hold. I heard a noise to my right and turned to see a young boy straighten and walk out of the room. As I heard the lock engage, I realized he had left a crystal wineglass on the floor by the cot. It was filled with what appeared to be red wine.

Micky finally released my hands and I fell backward out of his reach. He bent to pick up the glass and held it out to me. I ignored it and him.

"I need you to drink this, Sarah," he told me.

"Why? What is it?" I asked curtly.

"It won't hurt you, just drink."

I shook my head and turned away.

"Sarah," he said sharply.

I jerked slightly and met his eyes before I could stop myself. Immediately I was caught.

"Drink," he demanded gently.

Slowly I moved closer to him. I reached out with both hands and took the glass. My eyes were riveted to his as I raised it and let the dark liquid run over my lips. At the first taste I grimaced and spit it back into the glass. It was blood.

Micky raised a hand to my face and gently turned my head until I was again looking into his eyes.

"Drink it, Sarah," he told me. His voice seemed to wrap about my consciousness until it was all I could hear, all I knew. I raised the glass to my lips again but as the blood entered my mouth, I gagged.

"I can't," I cried in misery, compelled by his words to drink but unable to. "I won't, it's blood!"

He covered my hands with his own and raised the glass toward my mouth. "You must drink it," he told me firmly.

I thrust it back at him in anger and was gratified to see surprise in his eyes. "You're the vampire," I told him harshly, "you drink it."

He studied my face for several minutes while his hands held mine captive around the glass. Finally he raised the cup and my hands to his own mouth and quickly downed its contents.

"It really would have been easier if you had drunk from the glass, baby," he told me reprovingly.

I recoiled from him and twisted violently to escape his grip. He let me go and stood when I lunged across the room to crouch in a corner of the cell. I realized I still held the glass and smashed it against the wall. The glass shattered in my hand and fell in pieces to the floor.

I reached out for a large shard, but he was on me instantly, seizing my wrists. I jerked my arms to get away but he was so much stronger than I was and he pulled me to my feet easily. He trapped both of my hands in one of his, then grabbed the hair at the back of my head to turn my face to meet his. He held my body trapped into the corner.

"Calm down, Sarah," he whispered.

I felt a quiet creep over me and knew only fear and despair. I stopped struggling and when he released my hair, my head fell against my shoulder, unintentionally baring the side of my neck to his view. I remembered the feel of Michael's fangs in my throat and shivered. A part of me longed for the sensations I'd felt when Michael had fed from me, a bigger part couldn't get past the devastating knowledge that the man I had trusted was a demon.

"You are so strong, Sarah," Micky told me in a voice as sweet as honey. "But you can't resist me forever."

I felt his finger run down the length of my neck and shuddered. "You are a monster, a destroyer of life," I raged. "I trusted you! You deceived me and then expect me to obey your every whim?"

He laughed softly. "You know so little about me, Sarah."

I snapped my head up to look him full in the face. "I thought I knew you well enough to trust you," I told him venomously. "If I'd known then what I know now, I would have staked you on sight."

He looked down at me in silence and I saw remorse in his eyes.

"Do you think I know nothing of your kind?" I demanded angrily, ignoring his distress.

"I think you have much to learn about me," he murmured.

His eyes seemed to see right through me and he slowly began to lower his head. I gasped when I realized his intention and struggled to get away, but he had me trapped. His hand gripped my hair and held me motionless for his kiss. His lips captured mine gently, almost reverently. A thrill shot through me as the rightness of the caress appealed to my soul.

For three breaths, four, I stood unmoving in his embrace. I tried to remember how he had lied to me but all I could think about was how quickly his cool lips set my body on fire. He had argued and fought with me but he hadn't hurt me at all. Even now, his arms were a tender prison around me. Although I didn't want to admit it, I knew in my heart that Micky was a kind and gentle man.

For the space of a heartbeat, I couldn't resist responding to him, couldn't stop myself from expressing the feelings that flooded my soul. He pressed his body even closer against me and deepened the kiss. When I felt his tongue stroke across mine and sanity returned.

I stiffened in his arms and tried to pull back, but the wall was behind me and there was nowhere for me to go. I bit down on his tongue and he pulled back in obvious amusement.

"I thought you didn't like the taste of my blood?" he asked with a smile.

Shocked, I could only watch as he lowered his head and pressed his lips to mine. I bit at him but as soon as I opened my mouth, his tongue drove between my teeth.

I could taste his blood as it spurted into my mouth from a jagged cut on his tongue. He kept his mouth firmly on mine and soon I was choking on the substance. I fought to force the blood back into his mouth, but it was hopeless. Soon I choked again and swallowed reflexively. I gagged, but he didn't release me.

I swallowed again and the blood burned a course down my throat. My stomach was on fire. Again I swallowed. Heat like I had never felt engulfed my body and my head spun. Still he kissed me and again I swallowed. His blood was sweet nectar that I suddenly couldn't get enough of. In that moment I would have killed or died to continue the 'kiss.'

He released my wrists and my arms went around his neck to pull him even closer to me. I rose up on my toes to get better access to his mouth. His arms moved around my waist and his body pressed against mine until I could feel every inch of him against every inch of me.

We stayed that way for an eternity, kissing and sucking at each other while I drank his blood. By the time he pulled back, I felt intoxicated. I was dizzy and would have fallen to the floor if he hadn't held me so tightly. He picked me up and carried me to the cot where he sat me down gently.

My arms fell to my lap and I gazed up at him in wonder and shock, appalled that this creature of the night had the ability to effect me in such a way.

He moved away and I watched him pick up the pieces of glass from the floor and walk to the door. I was too dazed to try to escape when the door opened. Micky handed the broken glass to someone I couldn't see, and accepted a blanket. The door closed with a loud click and he returned to my side. He wrapped the blanket around my shivering form and sat down beside me.

"You are so beautiful, so strong, Sarah," he whispered as he took my hand and held it in his lap. "I don't want you to die. Please say that you will help me."

I pulled back in confusion. How could this monster make me feel so wonderful and be so kind to me?

I was bewildered by my feelings. I wanted so much to give him what he needed from me, but how could I? He was a monster, and I had vowed to kill his kind. I leaned away from him but he didn't release my hand so I could only go as far as the length of my arm.

"If I tell you anything I would be endangering both my friends and the cause I have lived for these last three years." I looked up at him, looked into his hazel eyes and knew that despite everything, I cared deeply for this vampire.

I leaned closer and touched his cheek. "Who are you? What are you doing to me? I thought you were weaker than Michael was, but you're not. You're stealing my soul and I should hate you for that but I can't!" I dropped my hand and began to cry softly. "Who are you?"

"I am all to you," he said intensely. "I'm your friend, your lover, your God and your Master."

Despite my aversion to his blasphemy, his words deeply excited me. I thought I was independent, that the idea of someone consuming my entire world like that would smother me. Instead, I felt that his words gave me freedom to depend on someone far stronger than myself.

He placed his hand over mine on his cheek. "I am all that you will ever need," he told me as he pulled me closer and bent to kiss me again.

When he raised his head a few minutes later, I looked into his eyes and knew that I was lost. I sighed and trembled helplessly as I began to realize just how much of a hold he had over me.

He smiled and pulled me back onto his lap. He reached over and began to feed me again from the tray of cold food.

"Tell me about yourself, Sarah," he asked. "You don't need to betray any confidences tonight, just tell me about you."

I looked at him helplessly. How could I fight? Telling him about me wouldn't put anyone at the Cenaculum in danger. Perhaps I could find a way out of the cell before he asked about the Society. Perhaps I would find a way to kill him or myself before I had to betray anyone.

I closed my eyes and said a quick prayer, then talked as he fed me.

I told Micky about my childhood in Minneapolis. I described the house we lived in and the love of my parents. I told him about the parochial school that I had attended until I reached senior high. I informed him of my parents' trips and the one they never returned from.

I told him about going away to college and my years at Quantico, careful not to reveal any government secrets. I retold a few stories of cases I'd been on, but told him nothing that hadn't been released to the newspapers.

I found myself hesitating only when I began to tell him the story of my recruitment into the Society.

"It's near morning," Micky said softly. "You can tell me the rest of it tomorrow night."

"Or not," I replied.

He smiled. "Promise me you will eat."

I knew he needed me alive, so I saw no reason to refuse. "Alright, but I can't promise I'll give you the information you want," I told him.

"Let's discuss that tonight when I return," he suggested. He touched my face gently, then lifted me from his lap and sat me beside him on the cot. He kissed me quickly, then said, "Sleep now."

Before my head hit the pillow, I was dreaming about him.

When I woke hours later, I ate all of the food waiting for me by the door. I refused to think about what would happen when Micky returned. Again I slept, and again I ate the food I found waiting when I woke.

I remembered how kind Micky had seemed when I met him, how safe. He'd been funny and intelligent and I'd trusted him not to hurt me. I had never dreamed that he would be a danger to me. Even now I found myself drawn to him despite the knowledge that he was a vampire. I found it very difficult to fight the way he'd made me feel.

I remembered my actions of the night before. When I thought of the way I had kissed Micky, how I had sucked the blood from his tongue, I flushed with shame. This was the reason Father Abraham prohibited dating outside the Cenaculum and I wished to God that I had listened to his warnings.

When Micky returned that evening, I was sitting on the cot with the blanket wrapped around my shoulders. I stood up and my knees shook from the hours I'd spent kneeling on the floor, praying for guidance. I was determined to be strong and not give in to this monster.

He stood just inside the doorway and looked at me for the longest time. Irrationally, I began to wonder what I had done to displease him. Finally, he motioned me to sit on the cot, then sat beside me.

"Did you eat today, Sarah?" he asked, his hazel eyes boring into mine.

"You know I did. I need my strength to fight you." My words were hard but I felt weak inside and hated myself for it.

He chuckled. "I'm glad." He reached for my hand and pulled me closer to him. I tried to pull my hand away but he wouldn't let me. The blanket slipped from my shoulders and I shivered.

"Do you still hate me, Sarah?" he whispered into my ear.

I jerked back, but he put an arm around my waist and pulled me closer.

"I am a vampire, after all. Do you still hate me?" He began to nuzzle and kiss at my neck, sending shock waves down my spine.

Again I tried to pull away, but he held me close. I felt his teeth sink into my neck and ecstasy ran through me. I closed my eyes and despite my resolve leaned closer to him. What I'd felt when Michael had bitten me had been nothing compared to the bliss I felt in the blood that flowed between us.

When he finally moved away I tried to pull him back, but he just laughed softly and held me away from him. I shuddered, remembering how strong he was and how easily he overcame my defenses. I looked up into his eyes and read satisfaction there. I blushed and looked down.

He raised a hand to his neck and my eyes followed it. I watched in fascination as he made a small cut in his skin with a fingernail. Blood welled in the wound and unconsciously I licked my lips as I watched it run slowly down toward his collar.

Micky tugged at my shoulder and gratefully I leaned closer. I laid my mouth over the cut and began to shake at the remembered taste. I felt like a drug addict, biting and sucking at the laceration to get more of the vitae that made me feel so wonderful.

After a time he eased me back and I watched in amazement as the cut healed on its own. My head spun and I nearly fell from the cot but Micky's strong hands caught me and pulled me against his chest. I felt as if I was awakening from a long sleep.

How could I fight him? He'd always been wonderful to me, so considerate. He made sure that I ate and slept and gave me the vitae that made me feel so strong. I had never known so much kindness from a man. Did it really matter that he was Kindred?

Micky sang softly to me, an old Jesters tune. His voice caressed the words of love until I was convinced he meant every one. I began to cry quietly.

He lifted my face and gently wiped away my tears. He kissed me very softly, then caressed my cheek.

"I need you, Sarah," he said. "Please help me."

I looked into his eyes and knew I would give him anything he wanted me to. "Yes," I whispered.

"Tell me everything St. Stephen's knows about us," he urged softly, "every detail."

I drew a deep breath and pulled back slightly. This man was a vampire, a cold-blooded killer of humans. He had deceived me and held me captive. He was everything I hated, loathed and feared. He wanted me to betray my Cenaculum for him, to forget the memory of my parents' murder at the fangs of such a creature. How could I do that? How could I betray all that I felt, all that I knew? Somehow this man, this monster had crossed all the barriers I had built, all the defenses I had mounted against him.

Despite all logic, despite my better judgement, despite my very will, I told him everything I knew.

"We know that your queen died a few nights ago," I began.

I told him what we'd heard about the old queen's death and the raising of the new one. I listed the clans and traditions that I knew, and explained what we'd learned about their disciplines. I told him the methods Father Abraham had taught us to kill vampires. I advised him of the Kindred hangouts we watched across the city.

I pulled away from Micky and stood to walk over to the far wall of the cell. I leaned back against it and wrapped the blanket closely about my shoulders.

"Father Abraham knows the mortal identities of several Salem Kindred, including yourself. I didn't connect his stories to you until you sang a few moments ago." I laughed ruefully to myself. "I used to listen to you when I was a child," I told him. "I watched the TV show every week. You're Mitch Denzol, aren't you? From The Jesters?"

I shook my head without waiting for his answer. "God, I've been such a fool."

I turned slightly and began to pick at a crack in the paint on the wall. "I think one of the guys has an inside source, in fact I'm sure of it. He has information he could have gotten nowhere else. But I don't know who the informant is."

"Does Abraham know?" Micky asked.

"I don't think so," I whispered. "Zane is ambitious and he protects his sources."

I turned back to face Micky with tears in my eyes at my treachery. "I have told you everything I know. Please kill me now, I can't bear to wait any longer." I closed my eyes in shame and felt tears stream down my cheeks.

Suddenly I felt Micky's fingers on my face wiping away the tears.

"I'm not going to kill you, Sarah," he said softly. "You have been a great help to me, and you will help me even more in the future if you live."

I whimpered softly and turned away from his caress. He wanted me to spy, to heap betrayal upon betrayal. I certainly had the training to spy for him, but could I live with myself knowing I was deceiving my friends day after day? Knowing that I was betraying those who had been my only family for the last three years to monsters we had sworn to kill?

Micky lifted my face to his and kissed me deeply. I felt his teeth scrape against my tongue and tasted our blood mingled in my mouth. In that moment, I knew I would do anything for him. Everything.

BETRAYAL

EVERYTHING WE SAY AND DO HURTS US ALL THE MORE
FALL OF GRACE - SARAH MCLACHLAN

An hour before dawn that morning Micky dropped me off ten miles west of Salem. I stumbled into a roadside restaurant and begged the change I needed to call the Cenaculum.

When Abraham and Zane arrived to pick me up twenty minutes later, I told them the story Micky had given me; I had been abducted by a vampire from the park where I had gone to meet Rachael and held in the basement of a small house. When the vampire had tried to move me I struggled and was able to get away. Because I was pale from the loss of blood I had endured, they quickly believed me. I was asleep an instant after they helped me into the van.

Jacob visited me during my recuperation and I was shocked to realize that he had no memory of our visit to the house on Elm Street. I tried to jog his memory, but it didn't do any good: they had stolen those hours from him.

Over the next few days, I passed along personnel files to Micky via the Internet. When I showed Micky the code I would use, he kissed me in reward. I burned with shame every time I remembered how the very touch of his lips made me feel.

One night soon after Abraham allowed me to leave the house again I met Micky outside of his apartment building. Before he opened the door, he told me to close my eyes. I listened while he turned the key in the lock and pushed the door open. He took my hand and led me inside. I heard him lock the door, and then he led me further into the apartment.

He stood me before him and rested his hands on my shoulders. After a moment, he told me to open my eyes.

Slowly I did so to reveal a scene of seduction. The round oak table was laid with lace and candlelight. Flowers in vases covered every horizontal surface of the room, even lining the foot of the walls. Champagne stood in ice waiting for our arrival. Strawberries and lobster filled serving dishes on the table.

I turned to find him looking down at me with quiet expectation. How could I explain to him that these things didn't matter to me? How could I make him understand that he was the only thing I cared about?

I smiled sadly and allowed him to lead me to my seat. I watched every move he made as he fed me champagne dipped strawberries and butter dipped lobster. I laughed at his wit even as I felt I was dying inside. I couldn't stop wishing that he'd done this for me, not because he needed my obedience and trust.

When the champagne and the lobster were gone, Micky pulled me into his arms and kissed me.

My mouth filled with his blood I swallowed it eagerly. The substance burned a path to my stomach and turned the fire inside of me into a blaze. I wanted his blood, needed it, craved the feel it inside of me. Soon I was biting and sucking at his lips and tongue for more of the precious taste of him. Ecstasy filled me as his blood coursed its way through my body. I felt strong and whole and completely alive.

After a few minutes, I felt the scrape of his teeth against my tongue and my blood began to flow. My arms crept around his neck and I pulled him closer as we drank from each other. I thrilled to the taste of our mingled blood on my tongue even as tears ran down my face.

"What's wrong?" he asked when he pulled away.

I smiled through my tears and shook my head.

"Sarah?"

I didn't answer, only tugged his head down for one last healing kiss before I left him and returned to St. Stephen's.

That morning I stood at the door to Abraham's study with every intention of telling him the entire story. I even reached for the doorknob, but couldn't force myself to open it. I turned away with a voice screaming inside my head to open the door.

I began to spend time with Zane, trying to find out who his source was. It was difficult because Zane was always edgy, as if he expected a vampire to jump out from behind every corner and steal his soul. I smiled as I thought that he should let it happen and find out how wonderful a vampire's soul stealing could be.

One evening I was with Zane in a bar on the north side drinking and talking about Kindred. I was subtly trying to find out his contact's name when I happened to glance at the next table and see Brenda there. She was sitting with a young girl and displayed no interest in our table. However, when Zane mentioned that he would be meeting his contact that evening, I saw her glance our way.

A moment later I saw Micky enter the bar and my entire being focused on him. I came back to reality only when Zane snapped his fingers before my eyes.

"Earth to Sarah," he said with a smile.

"I'm sorry," I told him, disgusted with my lack of control. "I thought I saw someone I knew."

Zane looked around but barely glanced at Micky, who was sitting down at the next table. "Any one I know?"

I shook my head and laughed softly. "Not even anyone I know," I told him. "Look, would it be alright if I went with you to meet your contact tonight?" I asked softly.

"That would be impossible," he replied. "I have promised that no one will find out this one's identity."

"I understand," I said.

Zane drained his drink and told me he would meet me later back at St. Stephen's. A few minutes after he left the bar, Brenda and her friend followed.

Micky had sat down close to my chair and now I heard him speak to me softly. "Don't push too hard, baby. You are too important for me to lose you if they find out what you are doing."

"What is so important," I hissed in a low voice, "me or the information I give you?"

"Both, Sarah," he replied in a tone that sent shivers down my spine. "Both. You know that without the information you give me, my... queen will order your death. You would be of no use to her."

"The queen, your sire," I whispered. "Do you love her?"

"Yes, she is my sire," he admitted. "I respect her. She is like a mother to me."

"And Brenda like a sister?" Even as the words formed, I cursed my loose tongue.

"Brenda's lover killed the old queen," Micky replied. "Even if she meant anything to me, which she does not, I would be very leery of him."

"What, you're afraid of Michael?"

After a moment's silence, I felt his fingers brush against mine where they clutched at the seat of the chair.

"It seems you know more than you tell me, Sarah," Micky's voice was low and dangerous, causing my heart to race. "Take care, love. Remember that to the Queen you are only as important as the completeness and accuracy of the information you pass along."

"And to you?" I held my breath in anticipation of his reply.

"You are very important to me, Sarah. I would hate to see anything happen to you. Remember that every bit of information you have, no matter how trivial, keeps you tied to me. Don't you want to keep it that way?" Goose bumps ran up my arm from his fingers brushing against the palm of my hand.

"Yes," I whispered.

His fingers moved away from mine slowly and I heard him rise from his table. I tried not to watch him leave the bar, but my eyes followed him out.

I nursed the rest of my drink, then drove back to St. Stephen's. It took me a long time to fall asleep that night, and when I awoke a small jeweler's box lay on the pillow beside me.

I sat up and slowly opened the box. Inside was a long chain with a pendant shaped like a guitar with a crown: The Jesters logo. On the back in tiny letters was an engraved message. It read 'You and I forever, M.' I smiled at the words to one of my favorite Jesters songs. I picked up the necklace and put it on. The logo fell between my breasts, over my heart.

I went through the day normally, working out and studying with the others. I spent a few hours that afternoon with Rachael and learned that Brenda had visited the coven again. From Rachael's description, Micky had been with her.

I returned to the Cenaculum in despair. What was I doing? Why was I ruining my life for this demon? I stood before my dresser and looked at myself in the mirror. I had lost weight in the last few weeks, and there were shadows beneath my eyes.

I took my gun from the top drawer and laid it on the dresser before me. It seemed to be the answer to all of my prayers. I was unable to tell Father Abraham about Micky, and I was powerless to stop telling Micky about the Society. I just couldn't figure out who should be the one to die: Micky or myself?

I picked up the gun and looked down the barrel toward the bullet I knew waited in the chamber. If I chose this route, I would betray no one else, no one but myself. I closed my eyes and—

A knock came at the door. Quickly I returned the gun to the drawer and opened the door. It was Aislynn.

"Father Abraham has a special mass he wants to give this evening," she reminded me. Her long dark hair hung past her shoulders and her green eyes shined at me with a smile.

"Alright."

"Are you okay?" she asked quietly. "You look tired."

"I am," I replied with a smile. "Working too hard, I guess. I'll be okay when the latest rush is over."

"If you need any help with anything..." she offered.

I shook my head. "Nothing I can't handle. Let me wash my face and I'll be right down for the mass," I told her.

"Sure." Aislynn went downstairs reluctantly and left me to my thoughts.

I moved to the bathroom and threw water on my face. I avoided meeting my own eyes as I dried off, then went downstairs to the chapel.

I sat in the chapel and listened to Father Abraham's prayer of thanksgiving. I wondered how long I could continue to live in this house of God and betray each person who lived there

with me. I delivered them unto evil with every question I asked, every message I sent to Micky, every drop of blood I exchanged with him. I bowed my head and begged for guidance even as I wished that Aislynn hadn't interrupted my earlier actions upstairs.

After the mass, Abraham asked the Society members to stay in the chapel while all of our visitors left the house. When we were alone, he began to speak.

"You all know of the evil that roams our streets, feeding on the innocent. We have tried in the past to eliminate them without success. The undead are good at hiding from our eyes. Now, thanks to Zane, we know where they gather, where they live. He has acquired the location of each of their council member's havens, even that of their queen. He also has received word of a celebration they are having tonight that will be attended by all of these demons in Salem. Tonight we will meet at the Wax Museum at midnight and we will burn this abomination from our city. We will purge our town!"

By the end of his speech, we were all on our feet. I was nearly in shock, and all I could think of was Micky's safety.

"Excited, Sarah?" Jacob asked me. "Finally you'll get to kill vampires!"

"I have waited for this day since my parents' murderers were revealed to me," I told him honestly. "It is too good to be true."

"It is true," he said, and went off with the others to prepare.

I stood alone in the chapel and looked up at the cross that hung above the altar. Slowly I walked to the bank of candles along the wall to my left and picked up a taper. I lit three candles, one for each of my parents, and one for my own soul.

I walked out of the front doors of the church and down the street a few blocks before I hailed a cab. A quick glance at my watch showed it was nearly eleven p.m.

"The Wax Museum," I instructed the driver.

"Lady, it's closed this time of night," he protested.

"I know," I replied. I handed him a fifty-dollar bill and he took me there.

When we arrived, he promised to wait for me. I left the car and with hesitation approached the two Kindred dressed in expensive suits who were guarding the door. My practiced eye told me they were both armed.

"The museum is closed," the one on the right said menacingly.

"I have a message for Micky George," I told him urgently. "It is extremely important."

"Just cause you think it's important, doesn't mean he will," he replied harshly. "Go home."

"Wait a minute," the other guard said, "isn't this the mole Mick's been keeping?" He raised his hand to touch my hair and I took a quick step back. Fear bloomed inside of me when he grinned and for the first time I remembered leaving my gun behind. "She's Inquisition, it might really be important."

"Inquisition," the first one growled. "They killed my sire." He made as if to grab for me, but the second vampire stopped him.

"I don't think Micky or Elvira would be too pleased if you hurt her," he stated bluntly, "or do you really want to piss off the prince?"

I wondered briefly what prince they referred to, then forgot about it as the first vampire stepped back and allowed me to pass. I darted between them and pushed open the museum's doors.

Once in the lobby, I paused to look around. I moved toward the first viewing room and gasped at the number of Kindred I saw. There must have been at least twenty of them standing among the displays. I hadn't realized there were so many vampires in Salem.

I looked for Micky, but he wasn't in the room. From the corner of my eye I saw Brenda and watched as she sent her teen friend out of the room. She nodded at me and I sighed in relief.

A few minutes later strong hands grabbed me from behind and pulled me back into the lobby. I recoiled from the bruising grip even as I realized it was Micky who held me. He shook me once quickly, snapping my head back and forth on my neck. I saw the anger in his face and felt the trembling in his hands; for the first time, I was afraid he would hurt me. I cringed away from him, but he didn't release me.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded harshly. "How did you know we would be here?"

"Abraham and the others will be here at midnight," I whispered hoarsely. "They will burn the museum and everyone inside if they find even one vampire here."

"What?" Micky released me so quickly that I had to take a step back to catch my balance.

At the rage in his eyes, I stepped back again and was brought up short by the wall at my back. My hands shook and I hated myself for the panic that threatened to overtake me.

"You have to leave," I told him through trembling lips. "You have to get everyone out by midnight. And they know your council's haven's, too, even the Queen's."

"How did they get that information?" he barked fiercely. "How do they know?"

"Zane," I breathed softly, alarmed at his fury. I shrunk back against the wall, but of course it didn't give way.

Micky saw my movements and they seemed to calm him. He visibly gathered himself and reached out to touch my face. I jerked back but couldn't stop his hand from caressing my skin.

"Sarah," he whispered. "You have to leave here. Can you meet me in the apartment at three o'clock?"

"I have to be with them when they come," I replied quietly. "They'll be suspicious if I'm not."

"I know," he said. "We'll be gone by then. Go now, and be careful."

He leaned down and kissed my cheek, then pushed me toward the doors. I ran through them and past the guards, not stopping until I reached the waiting cab. I had the cab drop me off a block from St. Stephen's, and gave him another fifty-dollar bill to forget he'd ever seen me. I snuck back inside unseen, and I joined the others when it was time to leave.

No one was more disappointed than Zane when we reached the Wax Museum and found it empty. When we returned to the Cenaculum, I told Aislynn that I had to go meet Rachael and I left. I drove around town for a while to make sure no one was following me. Two blocks from the apartment I turned off my headlights and drove the rest of the way in darkness.

SURRENDER

I BELIEVE YOUR BODY
I BELIEVE YOUR HEART
I BELIEVE WE'RE ONE
I BELIEVE WE'LL PART
I BELIEVE YOU — THE MONKEES

I walked up the four flights of stairs in silence and let myself in to the apartment. I stood in the center of the living room with my arms at my sides and waited for Micky to arrive. He came in moments later and locked the door behind him.

He pulled me close to him and wrapped his arms around me. I closed my eyes and fought against the passion and longing he created in me. He pulled away and turned my face up to his. "What's wrong?"

"What did I do tonight?" I asked, my eyes searching his face.

"You saved the Kindred society of Salem," he told me with a smile. "You saved me."

"I saved the lives of monsters," I spat as I pulled away from him. "Creatures who kill as it pleases them, who feed from humans as if they were cattle. I saved demons I despise!" I turned and walked to the window. I stood looking down on the street below that was as empty as I felt inside.

"Sarah—" he began, but I spoke over his words.

"I betrayed the trust of every person who has been family to me since my parents died. Abraham has been like a real father to me, and I have deceived him. Jacob loves me, would marry me in an instant if I showed the least interest in him.

"These people have been my friends, my confidants, my family for three years and in less than a month I have betrayed them all a hundred times over! What have you done to me?" Tears fell from my eyes and burned a path down my cheeks.

"I have cared for you in ways you could not conceive," he told me vehemently. "I am everything to you. I am your friend, your lover, your God and your Master." He turned me from the window and took me again in his arms.

I laid my head on his shoulder and felt his lips caress my temple. "I have hated vampires for as long as I knew they were real," I whispered. "What have you done to me?"

"I have loved you, Sarah," he replied softly.

I looked up into his eyes and tried to read the truth behind his words. Why was he lying to me?

"I'm not lying, Sarah. I have come to love you."

I wanted so much for that to be the truth. Could I trust him? This vampire who had somehow taken over my soul? I closed my eyes as he bent his head to kiss me. At the first taste of his blood on my tongue, I pushed the doubts I had to the back of my mind. He lifted me and held me pressed tightly against his body. Too soon he pulled away and returned me to my feet.

He stepped back and held his hand out to me. "Come with me, Sarah," he urged.

Slowly I took his hand and he led me into the bedroom. He left me alone in the middle of the room while he lit several candles. With a start I realized he hadn't used any matches to do so, the flame simply jumped from his fingertips to the wick.

Micky returned to my side and lifted one of my hands to his mouth. He kissed my fingertips, then my palm, then the inside of my wrist. Desire shot through me as his fangs slowly sank

into the tender skin of my wrist, but he only drank for a moment before he licked the wound lingeringly, closing it.

I watched him intensely as he reached for the bottom of my sweatshirt and raised it and my arms above my head in an unhurried motion. He dropped the shirt to the floor and ran his hands down my arms; his fingers running under the straps of the tank top I still wore.

He fell to his knees before me and bent to remove my shoes and socks. He was careful to leave the revolver in its sheath and, for a moment, I remembered the night that Michael had undressed me. I had been frozen in Michael's power that night: this night the need shooting through me held me captive.

Micky placed his hands on my waist and eased my pants down over my hips. The palms of his hands caressed my legs while he pushed the material to my feet. At his urging, I stepped away from its dark pool.

He stood before me, gathered me close to him, and kissed the top of my head. His hands eased the material of my shirt up to bare my back. I trembled at the feel of his cool hands on my warm skin and turned my cheek against his chest.

When I raised my arms and permitted him to remove my shirt, I felt very self-conscious. No man had seen me nude before that night, and I bowed my head to hide the blush in my cheeks.

Micky hooked his thumbs in the bank of my panties and slid them downward until they fell at my feet. One of his hands caressed my hip while the other rose to lift my face to his.

"I have wanted this from the first time I touched you at The Coven, Sarah," he murmured against my lips.

"Yes..." I breathed softly. "So have I..."

His lips covered mine and I put my hands on his chest. I had never felt anything like what his hands on my body made me feel.

My hands shook as I unbuttoned his shirt. I pushed it back over his shoulders and he removed it as I ran my fingers through the hair on his chest. I found his nipples and he moaned, then kissed me deeper.

Abruptly he swept me from my feet and laid me down on the bed. I protested when he moved away, but a moment later he was back. His cool skin pressed against the length of my body and I ran my hands down his bare back.

My head spun. I had no idea that being this close to a man could possibly arouse such feelings in me. I'd never allowed any man this close to me before.

I gasped when Micky's teeth punctured my nipple and he began to suckle at my breast. His lips and tongue warmed as he pulled the blood from my body. Soon his entire skin was heated to my touch.

I felt his hand probe between my thighs and shifted to give him better access. His fingers slid inside of me and I cried out his name. I could feel moisture spill over his fingers as he pushed them deeper into my body. I writhed beneath him and he released my nipple, licking at the wounds he'd made to close them.

I cried out again when he shifted, then gulped in air when I felt his sex rub against mine. As he eased slowly inside of me, I sobbed in pain. Micky froze and looked down at me, concern written plainly on his face.

"Sarah?"

"Shh," I whispered.

I pulled him down to kiss me and bit at his tongue when it entered my mouth. He chuckled and pulled it back, then thrust again it between my teeth. I reveled in the sweet nectar of his vitae.

Then he thrust into that other place as well and my body was consumed by fire, both inside and out.

His teeth pulled at my lips and tongue and soon the taste of our blood mingled. Higher and higher he took me, until at last I screamed my release into his mouth. He held me tenderly as I rocked back to earth. Gently he ran his tongue across the wounds he had made, leaving unblemished skin behind.

I lay quietly beneath him and for a time, blissfully complete.

He brushed my hair away from my face and kissed my temple. "I love you," he whispered.

I stiffened but otherwise did not respond. No matter how much I wanted to believe his words, I knew he was only using me to get what he needed.

Micky pulled back to look down at me, but I refused to meet his eyes.

I pushed a bit at his shoulder and he rolled to one side. I sat up and turned to sit on the edge of the bed. He'd performed his role admirably and I felt as if he should be rewarded.

"There is a small werewolf rite being performed near Boston tomorrow night," I told him. "Everyone will be going. I'll pretend illness and let you into the house."

"Sarah—"

"Zane is hiding something in his room," I continued. "He never lets anyone inside. You will have time to search it thoroughly."

Micky's hand fell on my arm and he turned me to face him.

"Sarah, I know you don't believe me, maybe you don't think a vampire can love, but I can. You have earned my respect and my trust. I wish..." He took a deep breath and looked away. "I wish we could have met when I was still mortal. Things could have been so different."

"If you were still mortal, you would have girls chasing you constantly," I told him. "You wouldn't have noticed me, and you'd be far too old for me now."

I reached out and brushed the hair from his forehead. "What we have is here and now. It won't last, it can't. I'll age and die or lose my usefulness and you will discard me, or the Society will find out what I'm doing and kill me. It doesn't matter. If you say that you love me, I'll believe you."

"It doesn't have to be that way," he protested. "You could—"

"Become one of you? No," I told him firmly. "I will not become that which I most despise. I can't forget what happened to my parents and I will not turn into the kind of monster that did that."

"Like me," he said sadly.

I closed my eyes and laid my head on the sheet that covered his legs.

"Know this, Sarah," he vowed quietly, "I won't kill you or allow you to be killed unless you betray me. I will always have a 'use' for you."

He began to smooth the tangles from my hair, but I didn't reply to his words.

"One thing you obviously don't know, Sarah," he whispered. "As long as you drink my vitae, you will never age. You will always be young and beautiful."

I sat up to look at him and he pulled me up to kiss me lingeringly.

"I must go, Sarah, the sun will be up soon."

I nodded and watched as he rose to dress.

"If you need to reach me like you did tonight, call this number," he told me as he handed me a small piece of paper.

Quickly I memorized the number and stood to hold the paper in one of the candle flames.

"Meet me in the parking lot of St. Stephen's twenty minutes after sundown tomorrow night. I'll be bringing Brenda and Nicaragua with me." At my blank look, he explained that Nicaragua was the teen girl I had seen with Brenda.

He kissed me one last time and was gone.

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SHATTERED BONDS

IN MY HEART IT'S THE SCREAMING I HEAR
I WON'T LET THEM COME NEAR
SINCE MY LOVE KNEW YOU
RUINS - MELISSA ETHERIDGE

The next evening I begged off from the outing. Aislynn was ill with a high body temperature and Father Abraham confined her to bed. He instructed me to keep an eye on her and made me check my own temperature. He said my eyes had the shine of fever to them and told me to rest.

Ten minutes after sundown I was waiting at the back door. When I saw the three Kindred approach, I motioned them over.

Micky put a hand on my waist as I led them inside.

"Everything okay?" he asked quietly.

"Aislynn is in her room, sick with fever," I told him. "As long as we're quiet, she should continue to sleep. You will have about an hour before anyone is expected back."

"Good," he replied.

I led them upstairs and watched at the front window of the building while they went through Zane's room. I fought my conscious as I waited for them to be done.

Had I really slept with a vampire? Had I actually let it go that far? What happened to my hate, my rage? A fiend like Micky had taken my parents' lives. How could I have allowed him to get so close to me? To make me betray everything I held dear?

My mind swirled in a confused cyclone of thoughts. Did I truly love Micky? Or did his power over me convince me that I did? Did he really love me like he claimed?

Such was my state of mind that I almost missed the van pulling into the drive. I dashed back to Zane's room.

"They're back," I hissed softly. "You have to leave now!"

Quickly they replaced the items they had displaced and came out into the hallway.

"This way," I whispered, as I gestured toward the front of the building. "Around the corner is a balcony. Drop into the chapel from there and go out the front doors of the building."

"You're not coming?" Brenda asked softly.

"I'm supposed to be sick, I'll go back in with Aislynn."

With one last look at Micky, I hurried back down the hall toward her room. When I entered Aislynn's room, she was sleeping soundly. I sat down in the chair beside her bed, picked up a bible and began to read. I took what comfort I could in the Apostles while I waited for someone to check on us.

A few minutes later the door burst open. I turned to see Abraham standing in the doorway, more angry than I'd ever seen him. He glanced at Aislynn, then gestured for me to follow him. In silence, I followed him to Zane's room.

"Zane has been shot," Abraham told me roughly.

"What?" I hadn't heard anything, but Aislynn's room was at the back of the house.

"There were demons in the chapel, girl," Abraham growled as I walked over to Zane's bed. "What do you know of it?"

"Nothing, father," I replied with a glance at his face. I pulled back the rag that covered Zane's wound. With my training in first aid, I had been placed in charge of the infirmary. "I've been sitting with Aislynn for the last hour."

Jacob appeared in the doorway and Abraham sent him for my bag.

"They waltzed right out of the chapel doors," Abraham raved, "as if they belonged here! They belong in our dungeon, not the chapel, for Christ's sake!"

Jacob returned and handed me my bag. I took out a syringe and a bottle of morphine and gave Zane a small dose. Then I pulled out a pair of long handled tweezers and probed inside the wound for the bullet I knew was still inside of him.

"Has the search turned up anything?" Abraham demanded of Jacob.

"Nothing, father," he replied. "It looks as if nothing has been disturbed in the house."

Abraham continued to rant as I found the bullet and dug it out. I cleaned the blood from the wound and laid a cloth over it before stepping back to wipe my hands.

Abraham walked to Zane's side and knelt beside him. He laid his hands on the wound and began praying in Latin. A green glow surrounded Zane, and he jerked in pain. He was quiet as Abraham stood and removed the cloth. Only a faint scar marked the place where Zane had been injured.

I picked up my medical bag and walked out into the hall. "What do we do about the blood-suckers?" I asked quietly as I turned to Abraham.

"I will find their queen," he replied with a sigh. "Without her they will be nothing." He looked tired. He reserved his healing powers for wounds of a serious nature because it took so much out of him to do it. He ordered that no one be alone at any time until the matter was resolved.

I could find no logical reason to get away from Aislynn, who had awakened and asked me to read to her. I couldn't sleep that night knowing that Micky would never forgive me if his sire died by my lack of action.

The next day I spent helping Jacob go over the security system of the house. We checked the sensors and changed the passwords, but couldn't figure out how the system had been bypassed. I suggested that the vampires might have had an accomplice at the security company.

"Probably ghouled them all," Jacob muttered contemptuously.

"Ghouled?" I asked, confused by the term I had heard in the movies. I had dismissed the expression as a piece of fiction.

"Ghouls do exist," Jacob told me, "just not like in the movies. They don't automatically go insane or begin to rot. But they do have to follow their master's wishes, they have no choice."

"Master?" I breathed so softly that he didn't hear me.

I cleared my throat. "How does one become a ghoul?" I asked.

"By drinking the blood of one of the demons and letting them drink yours." He looked up from the sensor he'd been checking and asked, "Are you alright? You look very pale."

"The very thought sickens me," I told him, suddenly feeling very nauseous. "How can you tell if someone is a ghoul?"

Jacob turned back to the sensor. "Just little things," he said. "They begin to behave in strange ways, do strange things. Sometimes they get stronger; sometimes they pick up one of the other vampire abilities. If they stay a ghoul for a long time, you notice that they don't age, and the aura, if you can see it, gets pale."

"Father Abraham reads auras," I whispered.

"Yes," Jacob replied. "But a person has to be ghouled for a long time before it shows up in the aura."

"I don't know much about auras," I told him as I attached a wire to the control panel. "What else can be read from them?"

"Emotions, deception, health," he replied, "that sort of thing. Abraham says I may be able to read auras. Sometimes I see things."

"What do you see, Jacob?" I asked without turning.

"Right now I can't see very much, but I'm learning. Usually I can only read strong emotions, and I have to concentrate hard to see those."

Jacob was silent for a moment as I finished attaching the wire.

"Did what happened last night scare you that much, Sarah?" he asked me. "I thought you were unshakable."

I turned to face him. "How would you feel if you realized that creatures you hated more than anything had been in the same house with you and you didn't even know it?" I demanded. "I wasn't even armed last night, Aislynn and I could easily have been killed."

"I'm sorry," Jacob whispered. He reached out and put his hand on my arm.

"Look," I told him as I shook off his touch, "of course these things scare me. They should frighten anyone who knows they are real. They can make you worship them, force you to do their bidding, even ghoul the spirit out of you. But they kill innocent people and for that they should all burn in the morning sun."

I threw down my tools and walked away to join Aislynn in the kitchen making dinner.

After the evening meal, Zane and Abraham left the Cenaculum in one of the vans. They returned over an hour later with a captive. Jacob and I went down to the dungeon to see if we could help. A beautiful black woman paced a large cell in a corner of the main chamber. It was the woman I had seen Micky and Brenda with in Boston.

"Don't meet her eye," Abraham instructed us from the bench that held miscellaneous torture devices.

"Who is it?" I asked, although I already knew the answer.

"The Queen," he replied.

"You are a fool," the woman spat at him, her dark eyes flashing, "and if you don't release me you will have a plague of Kindred on this house the likes of which you have never seen!"

I glanced at Abraham, but his attention was on the implements before him. Jacob walked over to his side and I took the opportunity to walk closer to the cell wall. Elvira stopped pacing near where I stood, and I was careful to stay beyond her reach.

"A prince in a cage," I said softly, deliberately meeting her gaze. I pulled the necklace that Micky had given me from beneath my shirt and made sure that she saw it.

"You should have taken *The Last Train Out* of town," I told her harshly.

Her eyes widened slightly and I knew she recognized the title of the Jesters' song.

"Be silent, mortal. I will feast on your blood before this night is over." Though her voice was mean and rough, she nodded to me courteously and I knew she understood who I was.

I tucked the necklace back under my shirt and told Abraham that I wasn't feeling well and was going to lie down. He and Jacob were absorbed in the tools of torture, and they paid me little mind as I left the room.

Somehow, I returned to my room unseen and quickly dialed the number that Micky had given me. After only one ring, he answered the telephone.

"They have your prince," I said without prelude. "Meet me at the northwest corner of the house in twenty minutes." I hung up without waiting for a reply.

I strapped on my gun, then carefully opened my window and climbed down a drainpipe to the ground. I moved quietly around the building and stopped at the corner I'd told Micky to meet me at.

As I waited, I allowed myself to contemplate the concept of ghouls for the first time that day. Anger rose inside of me. He had taken my will without my permission or my knowledge! The blood we shared created the bond and strengthened it. It also explained my feelings for him. How could I have been stupid enough to believe that he could care for me, even a little? I was ten times a fool.

When Micky appeared out of the darkness with his companions, even my newfound knowledge could not stop my heart from jumping. Regardless of why I cared for him, the fact was that I did. Although I knew I was merely his pet, although I knew he simply used me, I would serve him as long as he needed me.

"How do we get in?" Micky whispered softly in my ear. "Every light in the house is on."

I turned without a word and pressed a stone in the building behind me. A portion of the wall slid back to reveal a dark stairway. I led the way inside and when they had all entered, I pushed another stone to close it. Micky watched me carefully to make sure he could find the switch.

We moved silently down the stairs. When we reached the bottom, I removed a small brick from the wall in front of me. I pressed my eye to the opening and peered into the next room, but saw no one within. I replaced the first brick and pushed on another, stepping back as a section of the wall moved toward me. I showed Micky where the switch was on both sides of the wall before I closed the passageway.

We walked past shelves of weapons into a room filled with locked cabinets. Micky approached the door to the hall but I hung back.

When he turned to me questioningly, I whispered, "If I am seen..."

"I understand," he replied quietly.

I explained the way to the torture chamber and told them where to find Elvira. Micky opened the door a crack and checked the hall. A moment later he motioned for Brenda and Nicaragua to follow him.

I heard gunfire from the hall to the right and saw Brenda and Nicaragua turn to fire. I stepped back into the corner of the room and covered my ears to hide the sound of bodies falling to the ground. I closed my eyes and tears crept from beneath my eyelids.

Betrayal upon betrayal.

Some minutes later, I jumped when someone pulled my hands from my ears. It was Brenda.

"I need you, Sarah," she whispered urgently. "Something is wrong with Micky."

My heart rose in my throat and I hurried to follow her, ignoring the bodies in the hall leading to the torture chamber. Just at the entrance to the room, Micky stood frozen, his hands pointing just around the corner.

"He won't respond," Brenda breathed in my ear. "See if you can pull him back."

I reached for his arm and suddenly I too was caught. I still heard everything around me and with a great effort, I could move, but I could not let go of Micky's arm or free my mind to think. All I felt was terror filling Micky's mind and spilling over into my own.

I barely heard Brenda command me to pull at Micky. I strained, but didn't move him. I felt Brenda's arms go around my waist and she tugged me backward. I redoubled my efforts and felt him begin to move.

Then Nicaragua joined the chain and we were able to move Micky back into the hall. He staggered against the wall and in that instant I felt the stranglehold on my mind loosen. I supported him while he regained control and I fought to recover my sanity.

"Where is the prince," Brenda demanded softly.

I pointed to a cell on the far side of the chamber and she moved away. Nicaragua followed her.

I laid my head against Micky's chest, then closed my eyes to the blood I saw pooling around a hand on the floor at our feet. Micky's arms came up around me and pulled me close. I wanted to cry, but I knew there would never be enough tears to wash away the horror of my betrayal.

I had joined the Society of Leopold to slay vampires; instead, I had caused the murders of my friends and comrades. I felt Micky's lips at my temple and moaned in shame over the love I felt for him.

As Brenda and Nicaragua returned with their prince, a voice rang down the hallway.

"Sarah!" It was Father Abraham.

Stricken, I looked up at Micky.

"You have to come with us," he told me.

I stepped out of his arms. "I can't. He would know that I helped you."

"Sarah!" Abraham's voice was closer now, probably from the other entrance to the torture chamber.

Swiftly I fitted a silencer to the end of my pistol and handed it to Micky while the other vampires watched us in silence. "Shoot me," I told him.

"What?"

"You have to, it's the only way." I raised his hand and pointed the gun at my shoulder. "If you don't I'll be of no use to you. Do it."

Micky raised his free hand and gently touched my cheek. Elvira followed the others into the hall as I jerked the chain Micky had given me from my neck.

"If they find this they'll know," I told him sadly as I handed it to him. "You can give it back to me soon."

"Sarah, where are you!" Abraham sounded closer still and I feared he would discover us together.

"Now," I hissed urgently.

I flew back against the wall as the bullet entered my body. I bit my lip to keep from crying out and slid to the ground, pain tearing at my consciousness. Micky crouched beside me and placed my gun in my hand, then he was gone.

I turned my head and saw Jacob's face inches from my own. He had a bullet wound above his ear and blood flowed down his face. Stunned, I realized that he was still alive and that he had heard and understood everything Micky and I had said to each other.

Jacob's eyes filled with pain and reproach even as the light behind them was dying. As Abraham knelt between us, Jacob cursed me with his final breath.

"Sarah..."

I felt a splitting sensation rock my soul. The intense love I had for Micky shifted and surged, then receded. For a moment, I thought I heard him call my name.

I realized abruptly that since I'd left the cell I had always felt Micky in some portion of my mind. He had been with me constantly, no matter what I was doing or where I was. Now I felt

as if he had been ripped away from me and suddenly I was alone, staring into Jacob's dead eyes.

As Abraham felt for my pulse, I spoke.

"He's gone," I whispered repeatedly. "He's gone."

Abraham assumed I was talking about Jacob and quickly laid his jacket over the dead man's face.

Dimly I remember Abraham's healing touch on my shoulder. When I could stand, he helped me climb the stairs to my room where Aislynn washed the blood from my body. She dressed me in a nightgown and tucked me into bed.

I lay for a long time staring at the ceiling, unmoving. The only thing I could see was the pain and accusation in Jacob's eyes; the only sound I heard was that of my name in his dying breath. In time I slept, but my dreams were filled with blood and Jacob's face.

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REVELATIONS

THERE'S NOTHING LEFT TO FIGHT FOR
NOTHING LEFT TO SAVE
TIME TO SURRENDER - WINGER

For the next three days I laid in a stupor, unmoving, unspeaking, uncaring if I lived or died. I saw no difference between sleep and awake, both were haunted by the death of my friends, the memory of my betrayal.

Abraham made sure that that I was never alone. While his hands had healed my body, he feared that my mind was gone. Aislynn fed me and saw to my bodily needs as if I was an infant. They both prayed over me for hours, hoping for a miracle.

On the afternoon of the fourth day, my dreams changed. I was in the hall outside of the torture chamber and Jacob stood before me. He held the gun Micky had shot me with in his hands and reluctantly I took it from him.

"You know what to do, Sarah," he told me sternly. "Avenge me."

I jerked into wakefulness and looked around the room. Aislynn was asleep in a chair by my bed. Slowly and quietly I sat up and waited for the room to stop spinning. I felt very cold inside, as if there were no warmth left in me. I moved carefully to the closet and began to dress in warm clothing. I pulled a heavy jacket from a peg by the door, and slipped on a pair of tennis shoes.

Someone had cleaned my gun and placed it on my desk. There was no sign of the silencer, and I assumed that Micky had removed it before he had pressed the gun into my hand. I opened a desk drawer, removed a box of shells and stuffed it into the pocket of the coat. I picked up the gun and tucked it into the back of my pants.

I took a final glance around the room. Because of the small rooms at St. Stephen's, most of my personal belongings were in a storage facility in Boston. Other than my clothes, the Society owned everything in the room. I took my purse and walked out of the Cenaculum for the last time.

I felt stiff and sore from days of inactivity. With effort, I started my car and drove across town. I kept one eye on the road and the other on the sinking sun: I wanted everything to be over before the sun went down.

I parked behind the apartment building and took the elevator to the fourth floor. I unlocked the door and opened it quietly. I stood in the doorway for several minutes, listening; if I had thought there was anyone in the apartment I would have left, but it appeared to be empty. I walked in and locked the door behind me.

I went into the kitchen and took the box of shells from my pocket. I put it on the table and hung the coat on the back of a chair. I removed the gun from my back and placed it beside the shells. I brushed my listless hair from my eyes and gazed for a moment out the window at the sunset.

I sighed and went into the bathroom to wash my face. When I glanced in the mirror, Jacob stood behind me.

"You know what to do, Sarah," he told me.

I closed my eyes and leaned my forehead on the mirror. When I straightened, I was alone. Quickly I washed and dried my face. I hung the towel on a nearby bar and returned to the kitchen.

As I sat down, I looked at the window to see that the sun had almost set. For a moment I was concerned, then I remembered that Micky had no reason to search for me. Moreover, even if he did have reason to find me, I never believed he would look for me there. It was not the first time I've been a fool, nor the last.

I knew that even without the blood that tied me to him, I loved Micky. Despite his being a vampire, despite the betrayal I'd skillfully performed for him, despite the fact that people had died because of me, I loved him. I missed him dwelling on the edges of my mind. I longed to taste again of his blood and feel his hands on my body.

I shook my head and brushed away my tears.

I picked up my pistol and ejected the empty clip. I opened the box of shells and inserted them one by one into the cartridge. I'd nearly filled it when I noticed a movement from the doorway. I knew without looking that it was Micky.

Since I hadn't heard the door, I realized that he'd been in the apartment the whole time. Silently I cursed myself for not checking the bedrooms. Regardless of his presence, I resolved to complete the task I'd begun.

He stood watching me for a moment, then smiled and took a step into the room. "Bullets don't kill vampires, Sarah," he told me.

With a deft movement and a loud click, I pushed the loaded clip into the hilt of the Glock. Another quick motion brought a round into the chamber.

"Dragon's Breath will," I stated softly as I raised the weapon and pointed it carelessly in his general direction.

He froze. "My death won't bring back your friends, baby."

I avoided meeting his eye, but kept the weapon pointed his way and began to finger one of the bullets that remained in the box.

"Head wounds are very interesting," I told him softly in an emotionless voice. "A human can take a bullet to the skull and live for minutes, even hours afterwards, sometimes days or years."

Micky looked at me sadly and said nothing.

"Jacob told me what I have to do," I continued. "He came to me and told me how to purge the guilt from my soul."

Micky spread his arms and stood tall before me. "Then do so, Sarah," he urged softly, "for I can't bear to watch you suffer."

"That's why I chose the phosphorous rounds," I told him. "I have no wish to suffer one minute, even one second longer than necessary. I've never heard of anyone living through a head wound caused by one of these."

Micky took a step forward and for the first time, I heard fear in his voice. "Sarah, no. You can't."

I laughed tonelessly. "You don't control me anymore, Micky. What I can't do is live with this sin on my soul."

"No!" he cried as I turned the gun on myself.

I had the gun in my mouth and was tensing for the discharge when Micky reached me. He tore the gun from my hands and threw it across the room.

I struck out at him wildly and fought to reach past him for my weapon. He pulled me to my feet and wrapped me in his arms as tears streamed from my eyes. Desperately I tried to kick at him but he held me too close. I strove to free my arms but his strength was far greater than mine was; it was like trying to dent stone.

Frantically I turned my head and bit into his throat. At first, my teeth had no effect, but then I felt his skin give way.

Micky gasped softly and tangled a hand in my hair. He pressed my lips to the wound and blood poured into my mouth. With a startled jerk I pulled back.

I could feel him looking down at me but my vision was filled with the gash I had torn in his skin. Blood welled to the surface and I could taste its burning sweetness on my tongue even as I watched it drip down his neck. My breath came in ragged gasps and I fought the craving I felt for his vitae.

Micky held me patiently in place, unable to move or even look away from his throat. When the first drop of blood reached his collar and soaked into the fabric, I closed my eyes and moaned. My will was gone, my pride shattered. I needed his blood more than I had ever needed anything in my entire life.

I leaned closer and ran my tongue along the path his blood had taken down his skin. With a harsh cry, I fastened my lips on the cut and drank.

Micky's hands grew rough on my body as I sucked at his skin. He crushed me to him and buried his face in my hair.

After a few minutes he spun around and sat me on the edge of the table. His movements tore my lips from his neck and I looked up at him, panting. His eyes watched my mouth as my tongue darted out to lick the blood from my lips. He groaned and lowered his head to kiss me.

My heart cried out with joy at the feel of his lips on mine. I felt the sharp edge of his fangs penetrate my lips and tongue and wrapped my legs around his waist to pull him closer to me. My head spun as he sucked wildly at the blood flowing from my mouth. I laughed deep in my throat and bit at him until we bled together.

I ripped at the buttons of his shirt and he pulled it off in an impatient movement. He tore at my clothing until I sat naked before him, and then he pushed me back on the table, scattering bullets and plunging deep inside of me.

I clawed at his back and he laughed at me. He caught my wrists and held them captive above my head. I bared my throat to his gaze and screamed my release when I felt his teeth slide into my skin.

Still he moved inside of me, still he drained the blood from my veins.

I went half-mad from the sensations he was causing in my body even as I felt myself weaken from the loss of blood. I screamed again, weaker this time as another orgasm rocked my body. Micky collapsed on top of me and I fought for each breath. The skin of my neck tingled as he slowly licked the wound closed.

He raised up on his elbows and gazed down at me. Breathing heavily, I looked back at him. He smiled and ran a hand through my tangled hair.

"Sarah," I heard, and for a moment I thought Micky had whispered my name. Then I heard the word again, this time from my right. I turned my head and looked into Jacob's dying eyes and bloodstained face.

I jerked as if burned and felt Micky's hands try to hold me still. I knew he was calling for me, but I heard only Jacob's voice.

"You are truly damned now, Sarah," he told me sadly. "Nothing you ever do can atone for the blackness of your sins. The Lord will strike you down in my name. You are damned...." he called one last time as he faded from view.

FOREVER

OH TELL ME, LOVE, THAT ALL MY WORDS ARE A WASTE
OH TELL ME, LOVE, ARE MY LIPS TO YOUR TASTE?
TELL ME LOVE — THE MONKEES

I woke minutes or hours later in the bedroom of the apartment. I was naked but covered with a soft blanket to my chin. I felt both weary and weak.

I turned my head and moaned as pain exploded behind my eyes. I felt a hand at my temple and looked up to see Micky standing over me.

"Sarah," he whispered. "Thank God."

I looked around the room, unsure why Micky would be so concerned about me. Then suddenly I remembered everything. I closed my eyes and tears ran into my hairline. The bed sagged with Micky's weight and his hand caressed my cheek.

"I was afraid I had lost you," he told me. "I thought that I had drained you too far, and I knew you would hate me if I changed you without giving you the choice."

I felt a cold drop fall on my hand and looked up at him in surprise. A path of red glistened on his cheek. A tear for me, I realized in amazement.

"How do you feel, baby?" he asked softly. "Will you be alright?"

"I'm tired," I replied. "So tired." I tried to bring my hand up and cover my eyes, but something pulled at it. I stopped and looked at the hand and realized that Micky had inserted an IV into my vein. My eyes followed to tube up to a red bag hanging from the bedpost. I closed my eyes and turned my face away from him.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Why did you bother?" I replied softly. "Why didn't you let me die?"

"I love you, Sarah," he whispered brokenly. "I couldn't bear to live without you."

"Kill me," I told him flatly. "I can be of no further use to you. I can't go back to St. Stephen's, I won't."

He took my hand and kissed my palm. "I don't want you to. I want you to stay with me, to become one of us—"

"No!" I whispered fiercely.

"Stay with me anyway. You won't have to betray your friends ever again, I swear it," he told me.

"What about myself?" I demanded. "Every thing I feel for you betrays me, betrays the memory of my parents. What about that?"

He looked down at me sadly. "I told you that I couldn't give you your life back, Sarah," he whispered.

"But you said nothing about ghouling me," I shot back quickly.

"It was that or kill you," he replied. "You are so beautiful, Sarah, so strong. I watched you in that room, terrified of death and weak from Michael's 'kiss' but still you fought me!"

I blinked away my tears and tugged at the blanket covering my naked body. "Is this how was it supposed to happen, Micky?" I wondered aloud, remembering his words in the cell. "Is this how you were supposed to convince me to spy for you?"

"Sarah—"

"Was seduction on the itinerary the entire time?" I asked softly. "Did you have a to-do list with my name written at the top?"

"|—"

"Don't lie to me," I demanded harshly. "I have done everything you ever asked of me and the only thing I want from you now is the truth. How was it supposed to happen?"

He turned away from the resentment on my face and ran a hand through his hair. He looked down at me for a moment, then took a deep breath.

"We have been trying to get information about the Society of Leopold for years," he began. "Any operation we ever suggested was met by resistance from Beth, the previous prince. She was not easy to deal with, but eventually she gave us permission to try and gain a foothold."

"A spy."

"Yes. We have records on every Society member in Massachusetts. Beth suggested we grab one and torture the information from her, but cooler heads prevailed. We approached several Cenaculum members in social situations. When the Kindred who was assigned to you approached you, you wouldn't even talk to him. I ran into you by chance that night at The Coven and I recognized you from your file. I had nothing to lose by giving it a try myself."

"And I made it so easy for you." I closed my eyes in shame.

"You were so beautiful," he said quietly. "You didn't seem to care that I had ruined your sweater and you were gracious enough to sit and talk to me afterward. When you spoke of your work with the homeless, your eyes shone with an inner light I couldn't resist."

"I went back to the Chantry and never mentioned to anyone that I had talked to you. I didn't even tell my sire until I found out that you were in the cell and that Michael had—" Again, he ran his fingers through his hair before he looked back at me.

"You have to believe that I would never have let him touch you," Micky told me sincerely. He started to reach for my hand, then seemed to think better of it.

I hadn't expected this kind of confession from him. I had believed he had been wooing me from the beginning to work for him. I looked around the room and fought to keep my tears from falling.

"When you came here that first night I had planned to begin drafting you. I watched you reach for the urn, but I something inside of me couldn't bear to trick you like that. That's why I wouldn't let you pick it up."

"But the next time you came here I left you alone for a moment and you touched it. I heard you gasp when the exchange was made, and I hated that the bonding had begun."

"Bonding?" I asked.

"The urn is a Vessel of Transference," he explained. "A ritual fills the urn with the blood of the magus. Whenever anyone touches the vessel, the blood in the urn is exchanged for the same amount of blood from the victim. When you touched it, my blood entered your body. It was the first of the three feedings required to form the blood bond."

"There was no way I could tell you what had happened without loosing you entirely. I was glad when you told me you hadn't touched the urn, but when I checked it after you left I knew the truth. I told myself that I could never complete the process, would never make you my thrall. I wanted you to love me for who I was, I couldn't bear to think of forcing you to care for me through the blood bond."

He stood and walked to the window and looked down at the street. His hands gripped the sill tightly in an effort to stop the tremor I had seen was there.

"I review the security reports every morning. The night Michael captured you was our second in the new house and everything was chaotic. It was only in passing that I was told there was a prisoner. When the guard described you, I went right to the video monitor."

"I watched you praying beside the cot and I hated myself for not warning you, not making you leave Salem. Then I found out that Michael had gotten to you and I went crazy. I went to Elvira about you and told her that she had to keep Michael away from you, that I would kill Michael if he touched you again."

I smiled a bit at the imagery his words brought to mind. I would have liked to see Micky tear into Michael. I looked up to see Micky watching me as if he were trying to determine the reason for my amusement.

"You have to understand that I had no other choice but to complete the bonding, Sarah. The only alternatives I had were to give you to Michael or see you dead. I couldn't make myself do either. I thought I could make sure you weren't hurt any more than necessary, that if I did it right, you would never feel the chains that tied you to me, but I was wrong.

"If you hadn't been captured that night, if I had tied you to me the way I should have in the beginning, you might never have known what was really going on. Once you found out the truth about me, about what I was, I should never have tried to pretend to be what I wanted so badly to be."

Micky returned to the bed and sat down. He took my hand and kissed it gently. "By the time I sent you back to St. Stephen's, I knew that I loved you. I wanted things to be unchanged between us, Sarah, I wanted to erase the time you'd spent in your cell like we had done for Jacob, but you are too strong willed and those tricks just don't work on you with any reliability. I deluded myself into thinking we could ignore the nights you spent in the cell and that maybe I could make you love me.

"You thought I was trying to bribe your loyalty, but it was your love I wanted. I can't let you go, Sarah. I can't live without you."

He pulled the necklace from his pocket and placed it around my neck. He held the back of the pendant up so that I could read the words inscribed on it.

"You and I forever, Sarah," he told me. "Forever we will always be."

He let the pendant fall and cradled my face in his hands. "Can you tell me that you don't like my kisses, Sarah? My touch?" He ran his thumb across my bottom lip. "My blood?"

I shivered in response to his caress and closed my eyes, but didn't pull away. I knew he was right even as I hated him for speaking the truth.

A moment later his thumb pressed softly against my lips and I felt wetness on my skin. I knew I had but to open my mouth to taste of his blood again.

I turned my head away from his hands and slowly wiped his blood from my lips.

"You want to tie me to you again," I accused roughly. "You know that the bond broke that night in the basement of St. Stephen's and you want me back under your spell."

"Yes," he cried softly. "I can't bear to lose you. I will do anything, use anything I can to keep you with me, Sarah." His voice broke again and he couldn't go on.

Startled, I looked up into his eyes. He seemed so lost and frightened that without thinking I laid my hand on his cheek to comfort him.

"I know that you've done things for me I had no right to ask of you," he whispered into my palm. "I know that your friends died because of me and that you have more reason to hate me than anyone, but you must believe that I love you."

I looked at him, really looked at him for the first time that night. His eyes were free of deception and I felt under no compulsion to believe him. His lips trembled slightly and I watched as he pressed them together to stop their revealing movements. His body was poised

in anticipation of my reply. His hands clenched the blanket as if he were forcing himself to keep them from touching me. Blood stained the fabric where his thumb lay against it.

My eyes returned to his and, at last, I realized that his heart was there for me to read.

I looked back at his hands and took one in mine. Slowly I brought his bleeding thumb to my lips and kissed the dripping wound. Then I bit into the skin around the laceration and felt his blood spray into my mouth.

Micky's eyes widened slightly, then crinkled at the edges when he smiled. I bit his thumb again and more blood flowed into my mouth. I drew his thumb into my mouth and sucked at it hard. I was rewarded with a stream of vitae that burned my throat when I swallowed.

Micky laughed. With a flush, I remembered the feel of his teeth sink into my neck while his blood dripped on my breasts.

He pulled away and licked his thumb to stop the bleeding. Carefully he lay down beside me on the bed and wrapped me in his arms. He kissed me tenderly, then tucked my head against his shoulder.

I knew Micky was right, we did belong together. It didn't make a difference who died or what I betrayed; I loved this man, this creature, and I would follow him to the ends of the earth. At last, Micky had convinced me of his love for me, and that gave me the strength to survive.

I drifted off to sleep in Micky's arms thinking that Jacob was also right: I was damned no matter what happened now. I knew that some time, some where, some day, God would lay his finger on me and smite me down for my sins.

Sometime later, I woke to the feel of the needle leaving my arm. I looked up at Micky and smiled.

"Hey, baby." He sat beside me on the bed and brushed my hair away from my face. "Do you feel better?"

I nodded.

"Are you ready to go and meet Elvira?"

I remembered the proud black woman from the Cenaculum cell. "She wants to meet me?" I asked.

"Yeah."

I looked around the room, then remembered how Micky had undressed me and flushed.

"I don't have a thing to wear," I told him with a smile.

He grinned, then went to the closet and opened its doors. Hanging in every inch of available space was more clothing than I had ever seen in a closet. Evening dresses, suits, and jeans hung side by side.

"I didn't know what you liked," he said, "So I got it all."

Slowly I got out of bed and walked to his side. I put my arms around him and kissed him gently.

"Enough of that," he growled. "Elvira is expecting us soon."

He led me to the dresser and opened a drawer to reveal sensuous lingerie inside. He picked up a lacy tank top and held it up to my chest.

"Much better than that thing I tore off you earlier."

I laughed and pushed him ineffectively toward the door. "Go on," I ordered him. "I'll be out in a few minutes."

"Are you sure?" he asked. "You still seem a little weak, I should have went flying out of the room just now."

I nodded. "I'm sure."

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DEFECTIONS

WHAT WAS SIMPLE IS NOW COMPLICATED
AND ALL THE PLANS WE MADE JUST SEEM OUTDATED
TANGLED - JANE WIEDLIN

Twenty minutes later, I stood in front of the house on Elm Street holding Micky's hand. As we walked up the steps, he bent over to whisper in my ear.

"She won't bite," he said as he led me past the Kindred guards and through the ornate hall into the sitting room.

Elvira sat in a large winged back chair like a queen on her throne. To her right stood a tall balding man that I didn't recognize. I was startled to realize that Zane stood to her left. He gazed down at her with adoration in his eyes.

"My prince," Micky said softly, "I have brought her as I promised." He left me in the center of the room and walked over to kiss Elvira's hand, then came back and put his arm around my waist.

I glanced up at him and he smiled indulgently back at me.

"Sarah, dear," Elvira said, rising. "I'm so glad you came."

Zane's head jerked up when he heard my name. Rage ran across his features as he looked at me.

"My prince," I whispered to Elvira while dropping a small curtsy.

"What is she doing here?" Zane demanded. He growled softly and I was surprised to see elongated teeth behind his lips.

"I brought her here at the request of our prince," Micky said softly with steel behind his words.

"Sarah saved my life," Elvira explained. "She deserves a great boon." She beamed at me sweetly and I smiled shyly in return.

"She's the spy," Zane spat venomously. "She caused the death of five people! She deserve only death for her betrayal!"

"She saved the life of your prince," Micky stated curtly, "your sire."

In a burst of speed, Zane leaped across the room. He pushed Micky away from me and drew back his arm to strike me brutally across the face. I spun and flew back to land awkwardly on the fireplace hearth.

I shook my head to clear it and felt blood drip from my mouth and nose. Pain shot through my back from the impact with the hearthstones.

"Elvira," I heard Micky thunder, "control your puppy or I will finish him!"

I looked over my shoulder to see that Micky had Zane pinned against the wall near the fireplace, his fangs dangerously close to Zane's throat.

Elvira's laugh tinkled about the room. "It wasn't that long ago when *you* were my puppy, Micky," she reminded him. "I see the girl has put fire back in your blood. That's good."

She walked over to them and grabbed Zane's arm. Micky released him roughly and stepped back.

Elvira looked Zane straight in the eyes. "Obey me," she told him firmly. "This girl has my protection. You will not harm her or Micky in any way. Do you understand this?"

"Yes, my sire," he replied meekly. His eyes told a different story as they shot daggers at me.

"You must remember that your mortal days are over," she said kindly. "All your past loyalties have ceased to exist. Now your loyalties are to Clan Tremere and to me. Nothing else should touch your soul, nothing!"

"Yes, my sire," he repeated. "As you wish."

"Good," she said with a pat to his cheek. "Now return to your station and be silent."

Zane moved to do her bidding, looking very much like a puppy as he followed his mistress' will. The man to the right of her chair had never moved.

Micky knelt by my side and helped me to my feet. I straightened with difficulty from the pain in my back. He pulled out a handkerchief and wiped at the blood on my face.

"Are you okay?" he asked in a low voice.

I brushed my cheek against his cool fingers and nodded.

"I apologize for that display of temper, my dear," Elvira said as she returned to her seat. "It will not happen again."

"Yes, my prince," I replied. I took the handkerchief from Micky and held it to my nose in an effort to stop the bleeding.

"Micky, help the poor child," Elvira told him.

He shot her a disgruntled look, then turned me away from her chair. He tilted my head back and brushed my hands away from my face. He raised his wrist to his mouth and bit into his wrist, opening a small wound, which he then offered to me.

"Go ahead," he urged when I hesitated.

I darted a glance over my shoulder, then took his arm and drank.

"Concentrate on healing, Sarah," he whispered.

I swallowed and looked up at him, my mouth still on his wrist.

"Healing," he repeated.

I closed my eyes and pictured the wounds on my face healed, the pain in my back gone. After a moment, they were.

I released Micky's arm and gasped. He licked the bite closed and wiped away the blood at the corner of my mouth with his thumb.

"Feel better?" he asked with a smile.

Stunned, I could only nod. I knew that vampires could heal themselves, but I had never heard of a human doing so.

"Sarah," Elvira said drawing my attention.

I turned to face her.

"Your actions have earned you a place among us," she told me. "Micky has requested permission to embrace you, to make you one of us. I owe you a life boon that will not easily be repaid. What are your wishes?"

I looked from Micky to Elvira in confusion.

"Did he not speak to you of this?" she asked me.

"No," I whispered.

When I said nothing else, she prompted, "It is your choice, my dear."

I drew a slow breath in an effort to collect my thoughts. "My prince, Micky has shown me that not all vampires are monsters, but I still have reservations about joining your ranks." I licked lips suddenly gone dry at my daring. "I ask for time to learn more about your culture before I make any final decision."

"What you ask is difficult," she advised me. "As a rule mortals are reprogrammed or killed long before they know as much about us as you already know."

"I understand, my prince," I replied, "but I beg you to make an exception in my case. Let me learn about you and be assured that your race is no more evil than humans are. If it is true, I will welcome the embrace."

"And if you find differently?" she asked regally.

"In lieu of the service I have performed for you, my prince, I ask that I would be allowed to leave Salem and never return." I glanced up at Micky, then down at the floor. "I would find a corner of the world free from Kindred and hunters and never speak of what I had learned here. I swear it."

"Sarah—" Micky began, but Elvira cut him off.

"A bold one indeed, Micky," she told him with a smile. "You have truly chosen well. You will have your time, Sarah, thirty nights of it. Live among us and learn what you will. Just remember that by the thirtieth sunrise, you will be Kindred, gone from Salem, or dead. I will hold you to your vow. If you betray us, your death will be slow and painful indeed."

She stood and held her hand out to me. I approached her and bowed low as I kissed her signet ring.

"So be it, my prince," I told her. "You will not regret your leniency. At the end of thirty days, your debt to me will be repaid. We will be even."

I rose and returned to Micky's side. He put his arm around me and pulled me close to him.

We turned to go, but Elvira called him back. "If she chooses the embrace, you may wish another to give her the dark gift."

I felt him stiffen at my side. "My prince?" he asked softly.

"It is one of our rules, Sarah, one meant to stop trouble among us." She smiled sadly. "'Never embrace for love.' I broke that rule once, long ago. Nothing good can come of it."

"Of course, my prince," Micky replied.

Elvira leaned back in her chair and studied me for a moment. "She has great spirit, that one, and great courage. If it is your wish, my childe, I will embrace her myself."

The stiffness flowed out of Micky at her words and he smiled. "If that is her wish, sire. By your leave?"

"Of course," she replied. "I understand that you may wish to clean up your room."

Anger flashed across Micky's face and I saw Zane smile. I looked from one to the other in confusion.

"There will be no dissent in my house," Elvira stated sharply, "especially between my childer. Is this understood?"

Micky nodded and a moment later Zane reluctantly agreed.

Micky led me through the hall and up a grand staircase. "I haven't been here since the night I had to leave you at St. Stephen's," he explained as we entered a long corridor. "Zane and Abraham got into the house and destroyed my room. I have stayed elsewhere, but tonight its time to face this."

He opened a door to reveal a room that looked like it had been torn apart. Bed coverings were slashed, window dressings hung askew, and torn clothing was thrown everywhere. The worst of it was the shards of black vinyl that lay shattered everywhere.

I bent to pick up a sliver of black and noticed there was still a portion of label attached. It read *I'm Gonna Believe Her*, the title of a Jesters' tune. I looked around and saw the words of other Jesters' album titles. A few feet away there was a section of the Jesters' logo.

"There must have been hundreds of records here," I murmured.

"Yes," he said as he picked up a torn photograph of himself and Tor Kelson, the Jesters' bass player.

I stood and put my arms around his waist. "I am so sorry," I whispered.

He pulled me close and buried his face in my hair. "These are only possessions," he told me. "I can't replace you."

He lifted my face to his. "You made a serious vow tonight, Sarah. You have no choice but to honor it."

"I know."

He studied my eyes for a moment, then smiled. "I guess I have to convince you to stay. Come on, let's clean up this mess."

We spent the next hour cleaning the room. We found only a few things intact; everything else was a total loss. Zane and Abraham had been very thorough.

"How can you stand to live in the same house with him?" I asked.

He sat on the bed and pulled me down next to him. "He is arrogant and rude," Micky admitted. "He holds contempt for everyone but his sire, and places too much importance on himself. But in a night or so, Elvira will put him under my tutelage and he'll learn that he knows absolutely nothing. If that doesn't work, I'll beat the hell out of him, at least he'll respect me for that."

I laughed as Micky had summed up Zane perfectly.

"Will you stay with me here, Sarah? In this room?" Micky asked in all seriousness. "I could get you a room upstairs, but I want you with me. No strings, on compulsions."

I ran my hand down his cheek. "I will stay with you, Micky," I told him, "and I'll help you tie the strings."

He smiled and pulled me close for his kisses.

LESSONS

WHO STOLE YOUR HEART, THE SMILE FROM YOUR FACE?
WHAT ROBBER, WHAT THIEF?
WHO STOLE YOUR HEART AND THE KEY?
REMEMBER THE TINMAN - TRACY CHAPMAN

The next evening Elvira did indeed put Micky in charge of Zane's training. Unfortunately, that meant the three of us had to spend time together.

That first night, Micky taught us first about the Tremere clan. We learned about the Tremere oath, a long, detailed vow that bound each member thoroughly to the clan. Few Tremere ever broke the oath, and those that did were hunted down to die like dogs.

He told us about the Tremere Chantry in Salem, a place for clan members to study and learn new things. For reasons of secrecy, only Tremere were allowed inside certain sections of the building.

Then he taught us about the other vampire clans that lived in Salem: the business oriented Ventrue; the outsider Gangrel; the rough and brutal Brujah; the insane Malkavians; the hideously deformed Nosferatu; the hedonistic Toreador.

The clans seemed so different, but all had agreed to uphold the Masquerade: a law dating back to the middle ages that stated no human shall be able to prove that vampires exist. This meant that most feeding related deaths were accidental. Only the rogue vampire killed for blood in this modern era. The more I learned about Kindred, the less I hated them.

I drank from Micky each night, and soon the blood bond was reestablished. I was exhilarated to have Micky's presence in my mind once more. It didn't frighten me, although it certainly could have, because I trusted Micky to take care of me.

A few nights later, Micky asked me to run an errand for him. I parked his car in the garage and had just closed the door after getting out when I was grabbed and thrown roughly against the side of the car. I dropped my purse and listened to its contents spill onto the cement floor.

I felt a hand grab my neck and slam my head against the roof of the car. I pushed back fiercely against my attacker, but he forced me down and drove a fist into my kidney. I stopped struggling and fought to think through the searing pain.

"Go ahead, Sarah," I heard Zane whisper in my ear, "fight me. I have no problem with killing you like you killed our friends."

I closed my eyes and Jacob's words beat a rhythm through my mind. *The Lord will strike you down in my name*, he had whispered. *You are damned...*

This is it, I thought sadly. Jacob promised me retribution and this is it.

When it became clear to him that I wouldn't resist, Zane laughed softly. "You disappoint me, Sarah. Elvira thinks you have spirit. Where's that fighting spirit now?"

I felt the weight of my pistol at my back, but stood limp and pliant in his grasp. I pressed the palms of my hands against the windows. How could I bring myself to fight God's wrath?

He shifted and I heard him lay his hand on the car in front of my face.

"Open your eyes." When I didn't, he lifted my head and slammed it into the metal brutally. "Open your eyes, Bitch," he demanded.

Slowly I looked at the photograph he held before me. It had been taken the previous Christmas in the chapel of St. Stephen's. I stood in the center of a group of people with Jacob's arm thrown around my shoulders. Everyone was smiling at the camera, and I

remembered the affection we had felt for each other. Of those pictured, only Zane, Aislynn and I had survived the slaughter the night Elvira had been rescued.

"Do you remember this, Sarah?" Zane hissed into my ear. "Do you remember the people you betrayed? Murdered?"

I nodded painfully in his grasp.

"Were you his thrall even then?" he asked cruelly. "Did you give him a report on the presents that were exchanged? The hymns that we sang?"

"N-No," I breathed.

He slammed my head against the car again and my ears rang. I felt my lip split with the impact and tasted blood in my mouth.

"What? I can't hear you."

"No," I whispered louder. "I-I met him just a few months ago."

"How did you meet him? Did you kneel at his feet and beg him to feed from you?"

I began to cry softly and Zane spun me around. He threw me against the car and I felt the door handle dig into my lower back. He drove his fist into my stomach and I slid painfully to the floor, panting for air.

"Did you cry for his blood?" he asked mercilessly. "Did you?"

I shook my head weakly and clutched at my stomach. For a time, I couldn't breathe.

"Tell me!" he demanded.

"I-I met him at The Coven," I whispered slowly. "We started dating. I had no idea what he-what he was until after Halloween.

"Jacob and I watched the house," I continued, still gasping for air, "this house. We saw someone come out, a man we-we thought was mortal, and we tried-tried to warn him."

Pain tore through me, but I swallowed the blood in my mouth and went on. "He wasn't mortal, he was a vampire—Kindred, and another one we didn't-didn't see attacked from behind. They caught-they caught us and brought us back here.

"One of them took me downstairs and locked me in a cell. He took-took my weapons, my clothes—my blood. I was weak and I prayed for deliverance. I thought Jacob was dead until I saw him later at St. Stephen's and found out they had stolen his memory of-of that night."

Sobs overwhelmed me but Zane felt no pity for me. He kicked me viciously in the shoulder and I slammed back against the car door, hitting my head. The world spun recklessly around me until I could no longer focus on Zane's face.

"Go on," he growled as he crouched before me. He grabbed my hair and forced my head back so he could watch my face.

"I prayed for deliverance, for rescue—even death. But deliverance didn't come for me, Micky did. He made me drink from him and I couldn't stop it. I tried," I told him, "but like you, he was too-too strong and I couldn't r-resist."

I closed my eyes and felt the hot tears burn down my cheeks. "The next night he-he fed me again and, as God is my witness, I did beg him! I begged him to kill me! He said he needed me, needed the information I could give him. I knelt at his feet and begged him to kill me but still he refused.

"His blood gave him power over me and he controlled my mind; I-I had no defense against him. I went back to St. Stephen's and I gave him... everything he wanted."

Zane released me and I bowed my head. Tears and blood dripped from my chin to the floor. I buried my face in my hands.

"You're the one who sabotaged the raid on the museum," he accused.

"Yes."

"And you let them into our house."

"Yes."

"You told him we held the prince."

I tried to nod, but sobs tore through me and I couldn't reply.

"You brought him back into our house and you killed for him."

Again, I couldn't reply.

"Then you had him shoot you so it would look good. Jesus, you laid on the floor beside Jacob and let that murderer walk out of there unharmed!"

Zane ripped my hands away from my face and struck me fiercely. I was thrown to my side on the floor and laid where I fell. I felt numb even as the pain shot through my head. The room tilted out of control and nausea washed over me.

"What else did you give him, Sarah? Did you give Micky your body as well as your mind?"

"Jacob really loved you, you know. He worshiped the ground you walked on. I wonder what he would say if he saw you now," Zane said vindictively. "I hope he knew in the end that you betrayed him, Sarah! I hope he died cursing you with his last breath."

"He did..." I whispered through my tears and pain.

I closed my eyes and pressed my cheek against the floor. "Did he come to you, Zane?" I asked softly. "Did he tell you to punish me?"

"What?" he asked me. For the first time, his voice was devoid of cruelty.

"I prayed for death to take me," I told him, "and then Jacob came to my dreams. He told me what to do to make things right. I went to the apartment and I tasted the-the oil on the barrel before Micky—before he took it away—"

I felt Zane move back but continued. "I fought him, but he wouldn't let me go. Since then I've waited for Jacob's retribution..."

Slowly I brought my legs to my chest and curled into a ball on the floor. The force of my tears overcame me and again I couldn't breathe. My back throbbed to the beat of my heart and I pressed my battered lips together to keep from crying aloud. The world continued to spin madly around me.

I felt gentle fingers on my face but didn't look up. A hand took my gun from its place at my back and a moment later I heard the faint sound of silenced weapon fire. I couldn't understand the lack of explosions: I had never taken the phosphorous rounds from my weapon after Micky had returned it to me.

"Are you trying to kill me?" Zane demanded.

"If I were trying to kill you," I heard Micky say, "I would be using my gun, not Sarah's."

I heard the gun fire softly several more times and Zane cried out in pain.

"You'd better think about this," Zane urged. "What's Elvira gonna say?"

"I'd say he should have done this nights ago," Elvira said sternly from the front of the car.

I heard a metal object placed on the trunk of the car, then the sound of a struggle.

A few minutes later I heard a body fall to the floor beside me.

Tender hands lifted me and I tasted Micky's blood at my lips. I opened my mouth and licked at the substance, than drank.

"Heal yourself, Sarah," Micky whispered in my ear.

I drank and concentrated on healing as I had before. Soon the throbbing pain and the dizziness were gone. I put my arms around Micky's waist and rubbed my head against his chest.

"Are you okay?"

I nodded against the fabric of his shirt and for a moment, he held me tightly.

"This is gone on long enough, Sarah," he told me sternly. He pulled away from his chest and propped me up against the side of the car. He took my chin and forced me to look at him.

"I can't be there every time your death wish asserts itself. You have to get past this, here, now."

I looked away sadly. "I killed them. I—"

Micky gripped my shoulders and gave me a hard shake that jerked my eyes back to his. "You didn't kill them, Sarah. You stayed in the storage room and you never even saw any of them until it was over. I killed them. Brenda killed them. Nicaragua killed them. You did not kill them."

"But I could have warned—"

"I hold a blood bond over you, you couldn't have warned them if you had tried," he reminded me fiercely. "What do you think would have happened if Elvira had died?"

I couldn't answer as deep sobs tore through my body and I closed my eyes.

An unfamiliar male voice rang out through the room.

"I would have called a blood hunt down on every Society member across the globe," the man said.

Startled, I looked up to see the vampire that had stood at Elvira's right hand the night Micky had first brought me to the house.

I looked at Micky in confusion.

"Do you remember when I told you about the Tremere Chantry here in Salem?" Micky asked me.

I nodded.

"This is Ford Radek. He is the Chantry Regent and Elvira's sire, my grandsire," Micky informed me. "The Salem Chantry is very important to our clan, and the council chose Ford to lead it. He has more authority than nearly any other Tremere, almost as much as the council itself."

"If he had called that blood hunt," Elvira added, "every Tremere in the world would have heeded his call."

"You actually saved the lives of thousands, Sarah dear," Ford told me as he crouched by my side.

I looked up into his eyes and saw great affection in him for Elvira, and great strength of will. I knew he had the capacity to do mass murder in the name of vengeance.

I wiped my tears and nodded. I knew I would always feel some portion of blame for their deaths, but if my friends hadn't died that night, many more like them would have died around the world.

I looked down and gasped in surprise.

Zane lay only inches from my feet, immobile, a broken broom handle protruding from his chest. His face was battered and several gunshot wounds seeped blood. One of his arms was obviously broken.

Ford laid his hand on my shoulder to reassure me. "He will heal, Sarah. We've been watching him, waiting for something like this. You returned sooner than expected from your errand or we would have prevented him from hurting you at all."

He reached over and pulled the broom handle from Zane's chest. Zane jerked in pain, then laid still and looked at the four of us around him.

Elvira placed her foot on his chest. The wooden heel of her spiked shoe penetrated the wound over his heart by half an inch.

"Zane, darling," she drawled softly, "what did I tell you about Micky's girl?"

Zane tried to raise his unbroken arm and pull her foot from his chest, but Ford easily captured his wrist and with a quick movement snapped it backward.

"You do not touch your prince unless she has given you permission to do so," he warned Zane.

"Well?" she prompted.

"Not to harm her," he whispered.

"Was there some sort of miscommunication between us?" she asked. "Did I stutter?"

"No, my prince."

"I know you were able to hear us talking while you were...indisposed. Did you listen and understand what was said?"

"Yes, my prince." He darted a glance at me, then looked back up at Elvira.

"And what have you learned here tonight?"

He swallowed dryly, and glanced from me to Ford. "That Sarah had no choice in her dealings with Micky. That it was better for Jacob and the others to die than for you to face final death."

"Anything else?"

He looked at me with pity. "That God couldn't possibly punish Sarah more than she has condemned herself."

I lowered my head until it rested on Micky's knee. He put his hand in my hair and gripped my head tightly.

"Disobedience is a problem in any household," Elvira stated calmly. "In a Tremere house, it is forbidden. Since this is your first offense and it is a minor one, you may live."

I winced at her words. The blows he had given me had not felt minor at the time.

I heard Ford pull something from his clothing and turned my head to watch him hand Elvira an ornate glass vial filled with blood.

"Do you remember drinking from this the night of your embrace?" she asked him with a smile.

"Yes, my prince."

"And you remember your lesson with Micky about the Blood Bond?"

"Yes, my prince."

"Good, then you know that when you drank from this vial, you took one step toward being Blood Bonded to Clan Tremere."

His eyes widened in fear and I looked at Micky in confusion.

"You will drink of this vial," she told him firmly. "You will take the second step toward slavery to the clan. If you disappoint me again, you will drink from the vial a third time and be forever bound to every member of Clan Tremere."

"Yes, my prince," he whispered.

"Perhaps it would help if you began to think of Sarah as Tremere already, for I'm sure in time she will be."

He glanced at my face and I read panic in his eyes.

"Yes, my prince," he whispered again.

Elvira handed the vial back to Ford and he slowly pulled the cork from its neck. He leaned over and ordered Zane to open his mouth. When he'd done so, Ford carefully poured the vitae into his mouth. We watched carefully as he swallowed it.

When it was done, Elvira took her foot from Zane's chest.

He rose to kneel before her and bent his head to hide his face. From my position, I could see the emotions run across his features: fear, elation, misery, and finally acceptance. I saw the wounds on his face and chest heal, and his arms straighten. He touched his lips to the toe of her shoe and she smiled.

"Come, puppy," she ordered harshly. "I have things for you to do."

Ford grabbed Zane's arm and forced him to his feet. The vial disappeared into Ford's pocket as the three of them walked toward the secret passage. Within moments, they were gone.

Micky grabbed my shoulders and shook me again. "I want your word that this will be the end of it, Sarah," he told me. "I don't want to have to worry about you every time you leave my side."

"Micky—"

"Swear to me, Sarah," he demanded, "swear that you will forget whatever it is that you think that Jacob or God will do to you. Swear that from this day you will do everything in your power to protect yourself. Swear that tonight is the end of it."

"You're not being fair to me," I told him. "I have to swear because you want me to."

"You're right, I'm not being fair to you," he admitted, "but you're not being fair to yourself. Nothing that has happened since the night we met has been your fault and I refuse to let you take total blame for any of it. Swear to me."

"I swear."

"No, Sarah," he growled as he shook me once more, "you have to say it, all of it."

I pushed my hair back and looked up at him angrily. "I swear that I will forget what Jacob said about God's retribution. I swear that this ends it, from now on I'll protect myself if I am attacked."

He pulled me into his arms and held me tightly. "I couldn't bear to lose you, Sarah," he whispered against my hair.

I clutched at him and couldn't stop myself from crying. He held me as I let go of a large part of the guilt that had weighed so heavily on my soul.

When I finally collected myself, he wiped away my tears and kissed me gently.

ACCEPTANCE

I'M TIRED OF THIS WAR
I DON'T WANT TO FIGHT NO MORE
STRONGER THAN ME - MELISSA ETHERIDGE

Micky and I spent a great deal of time together over the next few weeks. We often went to a club called The Jester, which he eventually told me he owned. It was a bluesy little joint, but surprisingly enough it wasn't a regular Kindred hangout.

He showed me the places that the Kindred did hang in Salem. I met many of the cities Vampires, but found most of them to be strange, almost incomprehensible to me.

The Toreador were all a little spacey, often staring at inconsequential things for hours a time. I noticed that the Brujah were particularly aggressive to Micky, but he just smiled and fingered a small crystal wand he kept in his pocket. That seemed to scare any Brujah who wanted trouble and they quickly backed down.

I began to release the bitterness I felt about my parent's death. I knew that if Micky were being hunted, I would want him to defend himself, and in the past, I had killed those who were trying to kill me.

One evening I was at the house on Elm Street when Elvira called the council in. Micky was out of the house and I sat in the library studying up on clan history. At some point, a movement alerted me that I wasn't alone and I looked up.

A well dressed man in his mid thirties stood in the doorway watching me.

"Good evening," he said.

"Good evening."

"I am Malachi Jones," he told me as he walked slowly into the room. "I have heard much about you, Sarah Hamilton."

I looked down and closed the book I had been reading. I sat it on the couch beside me and put a hand on the ankle of the leg I had pulled beneath me.

"Oh? I'm sorry to say that I haven't heard of you, Mr. Jones." I slowly pulled up my pant leg and grasped the hilt of the knife I had strapped to my leg.

He pulled a stool over and sat just beyond arms reach. "It is said that Elvira will let you choose your sire. You must have pleased her greatly."

That was not strictly true, but I thought I would play along. "Perhaps she grants that right to any mortal who saves her life."

"Yes, I'd heard you'd done so," he mused. "Messed up your membership in the Society, no? Of course, given the blood bond, you had no choice."

Obviously this vampire did not like Micky and was trying to turn me against him. I smiled. "I would like to think that even without my tie to Micky I would not have let such a pleasant woman die at Abraham's hand. It was an easy enough task to arrange her escape."

"Such a shame your friends had to die in the process," he said with false sympathy.

I hid the anger he roused in me and smiled again. "One of the first things I learned at Quantico, Mr. Jones, was that sometimes in order to save the 'package,' friends have to die."

"You were an agent of some sort?" he asked.

As if you didn't know, I thought to myself.

"It's common knowledge, Mr. Jones," I told him. "I'm surprised you didn't know. You had heard so much about me after all."

He nodded to concede my point. "Tell me, Sarah, what do you think of the Tremere clan?"

"In what way?" I asked.

"Well, normally they embrace those with, shall we say, other talents," he said. "I don't believe you possess anything like that, do you think you'll fit in?"

"From what I understand," I replied coolly, "they don't limit themselves to that extent. And I have already begun to learn a few...tricks. Why do you ask?"

"No reason, really," he said slowly, "its just...no you have made your choice."

Let's play, I thought. "I've made no choice, Mr. Jones. Speak your mind, please."

"I just think that there are other clans that may be better suited for your...talents," he whispered in a conspiratorial tone.

"My talents?"

"Your fire, your passion," he told me. "Even your Secret Service background."

I smiled; I had said nothing about what part of the government I'd worked for.

"Another clan may appreciate these thing far more than the Tremere," he said.

"How interesting," I murmured, pretending to consider his words. "What clan did you have in mind?"

He glanced over his shoulder at the empty doorway. "The Brujah are very interested in you, Sarah," he whispered. "You could move up quickly within our ranks."

I moved my hand slightly to pull the knife a fraction of an inch from its sheath.

"The Brujah, Mr. Jones? Does Elvira know that you are trying to win me over?"

He seemed taken aback. "Perhaps we should keep this between ourselves," he suggested. "There is no need to offend her without reason."

"Do you think she would be offended by your suggestion?" I asked him. "She has offered to embrace me herself."

Malachi looked surprised at that bit of information.

"Perhaps you should check your sources better," I added. "The choice of sires that Elvira gave me was between herself or Micky. Make no mistake, I will be Tremere."

His eyes burned fiercely. "You will?" he said as he rose. "We shall see."

He spun on his heel and stormed from the room.

I returned the knife to its sheath and was surprised to find I had cut myself. I raised my hand to my mouth as Micky came into the room.

He walked over to me and pulled the stool Malachi had vacated close to me before sitting down. "Let me see."

I gave him my hand and he bent over his. I felt his lips close around my finger and the blissful sensation of my blood leaving my body. I closed my eyes and let ecstasy take me until he licked the wound closed.

He kissed my palm. "What did you do?"

"I cut myself," I replied. I told him about the visit from Malachi and watched anger storm his face. "Did I do something wrong?" I asked.

"No, baby. It seems that we haven't eliminated all of Elvira's competition. Brujah have never liked a Tremere prince, they think we don't have the fire it takes to rule." He held out his hand and a small flame appeared in the center of his palm. "We'll show them fire," he stated as the flame grew to the size of a fist.

Micky closed his hand to extinguish the flame and I laughed in delight.

"Show me!" I demanded as I had done so many times in the past few weeks when I'd seen a Kindred do something unusual. Often I couldn't duplicate the act, sometimes Micky couldn't either, but I'd succeeded enough to keep trying.

Micky pulled me onto his lap and kissed me. I tasted his blood in my mouth and drank eagerly. When he pulled away, he explained how to make the flame. After about half an hour of trying, I was able to accomplish a match size flame in the palm of my hand.

I threw my arms around Micky's neck and kissed him. Our kiss soon heated up and it took the sound of the door closing loudly to bring us back to reality. I looked over Micky's shoulder and jumped quickly from his lap when I saw Elvira standing in the middle of the room.

I bowed low. "My prince."

Micky rose and turned to face her, bending over her hand to kiss her ring. "Elvira, you look radiant tonight."

She smiled at him indulgently. "Don't you think these games are better left for the upstairs rooms?"

"Yes, my prince," he grinned. "Sarah was merely being overly enthusiastic over her accomplishment." Our eyes met and I smiled back at him.

"Accomplishment?" Elvira asked. "Show me."

I lifted my hand and a flame rose from my palm.

"Excellent," she whispered. "Most cannot do this until months or years after the embrace."

"I had a good teacher, my prince," I responded.

"Perhaps you should spend more time studying and less time playing," she suggested with a smile.

As she turned to go through the secret panel that led to the subbasement, Micky called her back. "What do we have on the Brujah status?" he asked.

She narrowed her eyes. "You know everything I do, why?"

"Malachi told Sarah what a good candidate she is for the Brujah clan," Micky told her in a tightly controlled voice. "He all but offered to embrace her himself."

Elvira studied me so closely I felt she could see my soul. "And what did our Sarah say?"

"I told him I would be Tremere, my prince," I replied, unshaken by her scrutiny.

"Will you? Have you made your decision then?"

"If it pleases my prince," I said as I dropped to one knee before her, "I choose to accept your offer to embrace me. I wish to join the Clan Tremere and serve as the clan and my prince see fit."

She held out her hand and I kissed her ring.

"Excellent, my childe," she purred. "The two of you will come to my room tomorrow at midnight. Together, Micky and I will bring you into the clan, you will truly become one of us."

I stood and took Micky's hand. "You have my gratitude, my prince."

"And mine," Micky added. He kissed her hand and she smiled at him.

"You have chosen well, my son, and made me proud of my choice as well. You have always been an asset to me."

She turned to the secret panel. "I will be in the lab the remainder of the night," she told us as she opened it. "I will see you tomorrow." With that, she was gone.

Micky and I went upstairs to our room.

He explained the details of a Tremere embrace to me. Elvira would drink the blood from my body, then make an incision on her wrist that I would drink from. When my body had

completed its change, I would repeat the vow he had taught me and drink from the vial I had seen Zane drink from. The vow and the blood would assure my loyalty to the clan as a whole. When he was sure I understood, we moved on to more pleasurable pursuits.

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GOOD-BYES

I'VE HAD ENOUGH OF DANGER AND PEOPLE ON THE STREETS
I'M LOOKING FOR ANGELS JUST TRYING TO FIND SOME PEACE
ONE MORE TRY - GEORGE MICHAELS

I kissed Micky and left him a half-hour before sunrise. He told me to be careful, and I assured him I would be back at the house before eight o'clock.

I went to my favorite beach in nearby Marblehead. I sat on the sand and watched the sun come up for the last time. I struggled to imprint every detail on my mind; the birds, the clouds, the sky. When the sun had risen from the horizon, I walked for a while on the beach.

I traveled the half-hour to Boston and the grounds of Harvard. I spent another hour walking the campus, remembering what it was like to be young and human. I picked a few late blooming carnations and returned to Salem.

I drove past St. Stephen's and parked down the street where I could still see the building. I remembered my time there with fondness, my only regret that I hadn't been able to release Elvira without causing anyone's death. I knew quite well that I couldn't change the past, and tried to put the guilt behind me.

I went to St. Anne's church across town and knelt at the altar. I whispered my confession to the feet of Christ, and lit a candle for my soul. When the priest asked if he could help me, I looked at him sadly.

"There is no help for me father," I told him, "but I have made my peace." I pressed a hundred-dollar bill in his hand and asked him to say a mass for me.

"I don't even know your name, my child," he protested.

"Say it in the name of all women, father," I replied, and walked out of the church.

By this time, it was mid afternoon. I returned to the park Jacob and I had visited the night we had been captured and sat for a while on one of the benches. I bought a hot dog from a street vendor laughed as the mustard dripped down my chin.

I bought a pint of decadent chocolate ice cream from a convenience store and returned to the water. I sat on a pier and watched the sky catch fire with the sunset while I spooned the ice cream slowly into my mouth.

I stayed on the pier until the sky was dark, then drove to Alex Brown's Record and Book Exchange. I wanted to see if he had been able to find any of the Jesters' albums I had asked him to look for.

Alex knew about the Kindred in Salem, but none of them cared. He found rare and valuable volumes for them, and they left him alone.

He greeted me as I walked in the door. "Sarah, dear. How nice to see you again."

"Hi, Alex," I replied. "Anything new?"

"Always the same old thing," he told me. "Until the next leap of technology."

I laughed. "Did you have any luck finding the things I asked for?"

He moved behind the counter and bent down behind it. "You know, I did. I got three albums from one of my contacts in Jersey." He straightened and placed the albums on the counter. "I had another offer, though, Sarah. She offered me more, but you asked me first. I haven't had a run on Jesters' material since they broke up in the sixties."

"Another buyer?" I asked. "Was she tall? Dark?"

He shook his head. "You know I can't tell you who it is, but I can tell you it wasn't a certain regal lady of your acquaintance."

I breathed a sigh of relief. "I'll match whatever she offered you."

"I was hoping you'd say that," he grinned.

I purchased the albums for nearly three times what I had counted on. Alex and I talked for a few minutes, then I realized how late it was getting.

"I'll see you later, Alex," I said with a smile. "Thank you."

"Anything for a pretty lady," he replied as I walked out of the store.

As I approached my car, I was startled to see Aislynn standing beside it looking in the windows. When she saw me, she straightened and called my name. She threw her arms around me and hugged me tight.

"I saw your car," she told me. "We've been so worried about you! Where have you been?"

I backed away and put my bag and purse in the car through the open window.

"Aislynn," I began, unsure of what to say, "I'm sorry I worried you. I'm fine. You can tell Father Abraham not to worry about me."

"Where have you been?" she repeated.

"I've been staying with friends," I told her with a glance at my watch. I barely had time to make it back to Elvira's before eight. "I need to go, I have an appointment I can't be late for."

She grabbed my arm as I turned to open the driver's door. "You can't just say 'Hi, don't worry about me, see ya later,' Sarah. You walked out of St. Stephen's without a word to anyone. You have to come back, with you and Zane gone, Abraham and I are going out of our minds! We had to hire mercenaries to replace everyone until the next group comes in and no one knows anything about the security system or the computers—"

"Aislynn," I interrupted her, "I'm sorry I left you in a bind and that Zane did too, but I can't come back to St. Stephen's. Things are different for me now, I can't help you anymore."

"Sarah?"

Aislynn was confused, I could read it on her face. How could I tell her I'd defected to the other side of the war? That at midnight I was to become that which I had hated the most only a few months ago?

I kissed her cheek and gave her a quick hug. "Do me a favor, Aislynn. Tell Father Abraham that I'm grateful for the things he did to help me and that I'm sorry I had to disappoint him. Can you do that? Tell him that I just had to walk away before anyone else got hurt."

"Is it because of Jacob, Sarah?" Aislynn asked.

Tears filled my eyes and I blinked them back. "I—I can't explain it Aislynn, you just have to believe that I never wanted to hurt—"

Unexpectedly I saw a large man lean against the car behind Aislynn. I looked quickly around and saw several rough looking individuals standing nearby. Furtively I pressed my keys into Aislynn's hand.

"Get in my car and go, Aislynn," I ordered her softly.

"Isn't this nice," the man leaning against my car called to his friends. "A couple of late night snacks out for a walk."

I felt Aislynn's hand tremble in mine and pushed her toward the car. "Go now!" I ordered.

"What about you?" she whispered as she reached for the door handle.

"I can take care of myself. Go!"

She opened the door quickly and was inside before the Kindred against the car could grab her. I took the door and flung it open into his stomach and he fell back long enough for me to slam the door. I heard the engine roar to life and tires squeal as Aislynn sped away.

I backed away from the group, hiding my fear and searching for the best escape route. "What do you want?" I demanded.

"Just you, babe," the one I'd hit with the door told me as the group closed in on me.

"Does Elvira know you accost her protégé in the street?" I asked scornfully.

"Nah," a multi-colored haired girl laughed, "Micky don't either, but what they don't know..."

I feigned to the left, then crushed my heel down on the big one's instep. I swung and hit the girl's face with my fist, then pushed her into another large biker type and dashed for Alex's store. My hand went to the pistol in the small of my back and within seconds, the Glock filled my palm.

I stopped short when I saw two of them between the door and me. It struck me suddenly that these Kindred were all Brujah.

"It's not nice to fight us, little lady," one of the ones in front of me said.

I raised my gun and shot him in the face, but didn't stop to watch his head explode. I dashed to my left, but the big one was in front of me. I fired at him, but he moved out of the way of the bullet and it exploded a nearby building.

Chunks of debris flew every where as I dove to my right, aiming for the alley. As I fell, I felt fire enter my shoulder. I rolled to my stomach, shot another Brujah and was gratified to see the bullet rupture in his stomach.

A knee came out of nowhere and landed on my hip. It pushed me down when I tried to rise, then settled in the small of my back, holding me face down on the sidewalk.

I twisted my upper body, wincing in pain from the wound in my shoulder. I brought the gun up and fired at yet another Kindred coming toward me, but my aim was off and I only grazed him, the bullet exploding harmlessly in the side of a building behind him.

The gun was pulled from my hand and I felt the barrel press against the base of my skull.

"You're way too dangerous with this thing," I heard the big one growl in my ear.

I felt the pain in my shoulder intensify and realized there was still a knife in my flesh and that the big one was twisting it inside of me.

I cried out in agony, then clamped my mouth shut.

"Pretty girl like you shouldn't be shooting at friends like us," he told me dangerously.

"Friends?" I spat. "You're not *my* friends!"

"We will be soon," the scarred Kindred I had winged said. He pulled out a length of rope and pulled my arms behind my back cruelly. He tied the rope tightly around my wrists, then backed away.

The big one yanked the knife out of my shoulder and dropped it to the pavement behind him. He grabbed my hair and yanked me to my knees, still keeping the gun pressed to my head.

"Butch," the black-haired guy who's buddy I'd decapitated said, "Can't we hurt her a lot?"

"We can't kill her, Blacky," the big one, Butch, replied.

"She can heal herself," Blacky whined, "after."

"After what?" I demanded furiously.

Butch drove his knee into my back. "You'll see."

"Elvira is not going to like this," I warned him through gritted teeth.

"We know," he whispered in my ear as he ran the barrel of the gun down the curve of my throat. "But I am."

Sirens screamed in the distance headed in our direction. A van screeched to a stop nearby and I took the opportunity to pull away from my captor and fall to my back on the pavement. I quickly palmed the knife he'd dropped and shoved the blade up my sleeve as he grabbed my arm and dragged me to the van.

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THE EMBRACE

IMMORTAL FEAR THAT VOICE SO CLEAR
THROUGH BROKEN WALLS THAT SCREAM I HEAR
CRY LITTLE SISTER (THEME FROM THE LOST BOYS) - GERARD MCMANN

Butch threw me roughly inside and my head hit the corner of a crate. I lay stunned for a moment, staring at a pair of expensive loafers. Dimly I heard someone call my name. I turned slightly and looked up as the van rocketed away from the curb.

There were three Kindred already in the van and three more had followed Butch and I inside. Blacky called the scarred one 'Leon' and the other had a shirt with the name 'Tito' scrawled above the pocket. The girl drove and remained quiet, anonymous.

A tall, ruggedly handsome man sat on the wheel well. His hair was dark and cut close to his head, emphasizing a receding hairline. He had hazel eyes that shone with a strange light. He was in expensively casual clothing.

"Sarah," he said with a smile as he took my arm and helped gently me to my knees, "it's so good to finally see you face to face."

I stared at him uncomprehendingly: something about this vampire me struck fear into the depths of my soul.

"I know so much about you already, sister," he told me, "but I have to ask; was killing that Lupine anything like shooting the terrorist in Spain?"

"What?" I was still dazed from the blow to my head and was just beginning to feel the blood loss from my wounded shoulder, but I fought to hide my fear from this man.

"I know the guy came out of nowhere, and shooting him was partly reflex," the man told me, "and the guy was aiming for the Ambassador's daughter. Did it feel the same when you killed him, love, as it did when the Lupine stood before you, claws extended and dripping with Nadine's blood? Did you get the same satisfaction from killing them both?"

I shook my head slightly. How did he know these things? No one had put the Ambassador's daughter in their reports, we hadn't wanted that information leaked to the press. And Nadine had been reported missing, we never found her body. How did this man know what had happened?

He leaned down to caress my cheek and when I pulled away from him, he laughed. His hand shot out and delivered a sharp slap across my cheek. My head snapped back and Butch caught me before I fell. He pushed me back roughly and I winced at the pain in my shoulder. I felt my mouth fill with blood, my blood.

"Soon enough, sister dear," the strange kindred said, "you will welcome my touch."

"What kind of drugs are you on?" I asked harshly. "Don't you have better things to do than piss off the prince?"

He laughed again. "Soon Elvira will be nothing but a memory, but even now she is of no concern to me. You, love, are my concern." He reached out to touch me again and I pulled back.

"Wyatt wants to touch you," Butch said as he grabbed my arms and held me within the man's reach. Once again I felt a sharp pain in my shoulder wound.

Wyatt's cold hand ran slowly down the side of my face and touched the blood on my chin.

"So fragile, Sarah," he murmured. "Soon you will be as I and we will rule together, as it was meant to be."

I shook from the effort it took to stop myself from panicking.

"Are you cold, love?" he asked.

I nodded slowly.

He took off his sport jacket and placed it around my shoulders, covering my bound hands. I bent my head for a moment and concentrated on healing like Micky had taught me. I felt stronger afterwards, and very carefully I eased the knife from my sleeve to work at the ropes on my wrists.

"You will be as I," he told me, "but I will have another turn you. I wouldn't want to you come to hate me, sister dearest."

"I'm not your sister," I couldn't stop myself from hissing.

He smiled almost lovingly down at me. "You will see, my love."

I spat in his face and he grinned, then licked at the blood and the spittle from his lips.

Before I could blink his hand struck again and I flew to my left against Tito. I almost lost my grip on the knife as the final threads of the rope gave way. Tito licked at the blood on my chin and I heard Wyatt laugh again.

The van slowed, then pulled into some type of garage and stopped.

"Take her," Wyatt told Butch.

Butch grabbed my hair and pulled me out of the van and as I fell to the ground the jacket dropped to the floor and I slashed upward with the knife, nearly severing his hand. I grabbed for my gun at his waist then turned and fired into the van.

I heard the round explode as I ran through a doorway into a warehouse. I was slower than I'd hoped, but surprise was with me. I turned and hit Tito in the throat with a bullet and an instant later his head erupted in a spray of blood. Another bullet caught Blacky in the chest and he fell to the ground.

I flung the knife at Wyatt and as I turned to run I saw him pull the blade out of his stomach and lick it. I rounded a corner and waited.

"Don't kill her," I heard Wyatt say, "just remind her who is in charge."

The girl stuck her head around the corner and I blew it off, then ran toward the back of the warehouse. I picked another ambush spot but they were more careful this time and I missed Leon when he sprang back from the bullet.

We played cat and mouse for a while, but each time they cornered me I was able to slip away. I was very aware that I had only one bullet left in gun, but unfortunately, a clear shot did not present itself, so I refrained from firing.

After some time, it was clear that they were driving me into a corner of the warehouse. Desperately I searched for a way to escape. I knew it was long past eight and that Micky would be looking for me. I felt blood dripping down my arm and onto the floor. The pain in my face dragged at me, tiring me. I prayed that Micky would find me in time.

Finally, they had me backed into a corner. Blacky held his healing stomach while he and Leon approached from my left. Butch and Wyatt appeared in a break in the crates to my right. I pointed the gun from one Kindred to the next, not sure what one to take out. Then I remembered what they had said in the street and pointed the gun at my own head. They all stopped, surprised.

"Love, you don't want to do that," Wyatt said gently. "Don't you want to live forever?"

"With you? As a Brujah?" I spat at him. "Not!" I felt the wall against my back and fought the fear that threatened to choke me.

"Hey, Brujah are cool," Butch said. "How else can you get away with anything you want, forever?"

"You mean like Tito?" I asked sweetly.

Blacky and Leon growled and took a step forward.

"I wouldn't" I told them. "If you know so much about me, you should know how I feel about vampires. Elvira's different, she's the prince, and Micky's got that blood bond thing going, but mostly I hate vampires." Anger made my voice thick. "And I'd rather die than be like you!"

I shot at the light above Wyatt's head and an electrical explosion rained down on him. I ran through the opening I'd created but Brujah can be very fast, and Butch caught me before I'd taken more than a dozen steps.

I whipped around and the empty pistol caught Butch on the side of his head. The blow had no effect, and he grinned at me revealing his extended fangs. I tried to pull away but I was weak and he laughed at me.

He pulled me over to a barrel and threw me across the top of it face down. Rough hands tore my shirt from my back, leaving me wearing a silk tank top. I felt Butch's tongue lick at the blood on my shoulder and I shuddered with revulsion. He covered the barely healed wound with his mouth, sank his teeth into tender flesh and drank. I screamed in agony and felt my body grow weaker.

I looked at the man who claimed to be my brother. He stood nearby with his arms crossed and an expression of satisfaction on his face. His eyes burned while he watched Butch drink from me.

I closed my eyes to block out his face and a moment later felt a cold hand caress my ankle. With a quick movement, my jeans were torn away from my legs and I looked back to see Wyatt there, gazing almost mesmerized at my skin. Slowly he bent over and pushed his teeth into my body. I threw my head back and screamed in anguish.

"Sarah!" I heard echo through the warehouse. I thought at first I was imagining it, but then I realized it really was Micky and I fought Butch, trying to break free.

Wyatt raised himself a little, then moved higher on my legs. As his fangs penetrated my flesh, I screamed again. Dimly I heard gunshots and tried to fight harder, but I was weakening. Again and again Wyatt sank his teeth into my flesh as Butch drank from my shoulder. Again and again I couldn't stop myself from screaming with pain.

Butch withdrew from the wound on my shoulder and licked at it until it closed. He rolled me onto my back and Wyatt came with me, biting into my other leg. I could tell my screams were getting weaker, could feel the strength leaving my body. Butch bent to feed from my neck and when his teeth entered my vein, I could scream no more.

Dimly I heard Micky call out for me again, and I whispered his name as tears streamed from my eyes. My heart felt as if it would explode from the effort of pumping what little blood remained in my veins. My entire body felt like one big bruise that throbbed weakly to the pounding of my heart.

As Wyatt found another spot to feed from, Butch pulled back his sleeve and I watched him bite his own wrist.

"No," I whispered desperately, and began to fight again. Butch backhanded me and through the haze that dropped over my mind, I heard more gunshots, closer this time.

Wyatt withdrew. "Do it now," he barked at Butch.

Butch grabbed my hair and held his wrist to my mouth. I struggled to get away, but I was too weak. I felt the burning liquid enter my mouth but refused to swallow. I felt it overflow and run down my face into my hair.

Suddenly Butch was gone and I turned my head to let the blood drain from my mouth. I knew I was going to die: the shoulder wounds and numerous bites I suffered had depleted my blood supply dangerously low. I sensed my heart slow its beating, my breathing ease. I felt blood ooze slowly from each of my injuries and struggled not to swallow the vitae in my mouth; I didn't have the strength to spit it out.

Then I felt hands on either side of my face gently forcing me to look up. I knew vaguely that it was Micky, and I tried to speak his name, but couldn't.

He bent to kiss me gently and eased his tongue into my mouth. I could taste his blood as it mingled with Butch's. I swallowed reflexively and the combined vitae burned a path to my stomach. My mouth filled again and I jerked when fire shot through my entire body and I felt as if some part of my soul was ripped away.

I began licking and sucking at Micky's tongue, scraping it, tearing the wound he'd made open even further. Greedily I drank, knowing that this would make me what he was.

I noticed voices around me, but didn't care what they were saying. I felt someone licking at the wounds on my legs. I heard Micky's voice in my head telling me he loved me, begging me not to die. I felt my mind call out to him with love and joy knowing that now I was truly his. I felt his surprise as my words touched him and he kissed me tenderly one last time. Then he was gone and I couldn't feel him anymore, not even in my head.

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FEAR AND SAFETY

STRANGE VOICES ARE SAYING
THINGS I CAN'T UNDERSTAND
CRUEL SUMMER - BANANARAMA

My eyes felt like they had been sealed shut and I couldn't move at all. I drifted for a while, my mind feeling as heavy and slow as my body. I could feel changes taking place in my body, and my skin tingled and burned. If I could have spoken, I would have cried out from the pain. Lights flickered behind my closed lids and I felt as if my body was twitching violently. Micky told me later that I never moved at all.

As if from far away, I heard Zane's voice. "Ah, guys? Can we go now? All the bad Brujah are dead."

I felt myself being lifted and held against a broad chest. I knew from his scent that it was Micky. He carried me a long way, then sat down with me on his lap. I could feel him trembling, hear him whispering to me.

"Sarah, wake up," he said very softly. "You have to wake up, baby, I need you. How can I exist without you beside me? You can't leave me this way, I need you!"

Tears fell from my eyes and it seemed to break the spell I was under. Slowly I opened my eyes and looked, not at Micky, but to the man beside him.

I saw the rugged handsomeness, the receding hairline, and the hazel eyes. It was him—Wyatt! I jerked back against the door, terror constricting my throat as I fumbled for the door handle. I felt hands trying to restrain me and as I fought against them I felt the unfamiliar sensation of teeth growing in my mouth. I hissed at the man who held me and clawed at his face. I fought like a wildcat in an effort to escape. I had to get away from Wyatt!

The car rocked to a stop and suddenly I had the door open and was falling to the ground. As I stumbled to my feet, arms encircled my waist, holding me in an iron grip. I reared wildly, trying recklessly to get away. Then another man grabbed my wrists and the one who held my waist pulled me backward toward the car. I swung out with my feet, desperate to escape, and felt the second man let go of my hands. I tore at the arms around me, then sagged in them as a fist collided with my jaw. I was stunned long enough for them to get me back into the car.

Hands gripped my face and forced me to look into a pair of hazel eyes.

"Sarah," a deep and soothing voice said to me, "calm down."

I felt my body and mind relax as I looked into those familiar eyes. After a moment, I realized that it was Micky who held me.

Tears filled my eyes and I laid my head down on his chest. "Micky," I whispered, "I was so afraid."

His hands soothed across my back. "I know, baby," he said softly against my hair. "Me too. I thought you were going to die."

I clung to him as he tucked his jacket around me and ran his hands up and down my back. The terror I'd felt began to fade and I closed my eyes. I listened to his voice as he sang softly to me of love and peace.

When the car stopped he gathered me in his arms and carried me into the house. He called out for Elvira and a moment later I heard her answer.

"For the love of Caine!" she exclaimed. "What happened?"

I felt her hands touch my face I looked up at her. "My prince," I whispered. I tried to smile, but I couldn't and I turned away.

For a moment, there was stunned silence, then Elvira ordered Micky to take me to her chamber.

He carried me up the stair and into her bedroom. As he laid me gently on the bed, Elvira told him to take off the remains of my clothes and clean me up.

"What happened?" Elvira asked.

"I don't know what they did to her," Micky whispered, "but when I found her she was drained, almost dead. I had no choice but to embrace her."

I heard them talk quietly while they worked, but I didn't pay attention to their words. Soon I lay naked and cold on her bed. I felt a warm cloth run over my skin, cleaning me from head to foot. I felt tired, emotionally exhausted, and I let him care for me with no interference. Gently Micky dressed me in a clean nightgown, then pulled the blankets up over me.

"Can you tell us what happened, Sarah?" she asked gently.

I opened my eyes and looked at Micky, who sat beside me on the bed. He took my hand and the worry on his face made me realize exactly how much I loved him.

I looked up to where Elvira stood at his shoulder. "My prince," I began. My voice broke at first, then gained strength. I explained how I had visited Alex's store and met Aislynn outside. I told them how I had fought the Brujah, but that they had captured me.

"I tried to kill them but there were so many of them and they were so fast. They tied my hands behind my back and put me in a van. One of the Brujah waiting inside seemed to know me. He talked so strangely, like he'd known me all my life. He knew things I've never told anyone. He said he wanted me to be like him."

I clutched at Micky's hand and he squeezed mine reassuringly. "He terrified me. I managed to cut the ropes and got away from them when they stopped the van. I got my gun back and killed some of them, but I was running out of bullets and there were so many of them—" I started crying and had to stop.

"Take all the time you need, Sarah," Elvira said softly. The sympathy in her gaze encouraged me and after a moment I continued.

"They caught me and threw me down on a barrel," I said softly, my voice shaking with remembered horror. "They bit me and I screamed..."

"I heard you," Micky whispered, agonized.

"And I heard you," I told him. "Somehow I knew you would save me. I really don't—don't remember anything else until I saw that man again in the car. I tried to get away from him but I couldn't."

I looked at Micky pleadingly. "Was he in the car? Did I imagine him there?"

He glanced up at Elvira. "There was a man in the car, but it was Bruce Blackwell, Brenda's 'childe.'"

"But he looked so much like Wyatt," I said, confused.

"Are you sure?"

I thought about it for a moment, remembering the terror I'd felt in the car. "No," I admitted, "I'm not sure."

"Sarah," Elvira said gently. "Micky said there was blood on your mouth when he found you. Did you swallow any of the Brujah's blood before Micky could get to you?"

I tried to remember, but everything about those moments was a blur. "I don't know. Why?"

"If you did, *you* are Brujah," Micky whispered.

"I—" I remembered Butch's teeth at my throat, his wrist on my lips. I could almost taste his blood mingled with Micky's. Had I swallowed before Micky reached me? As close to death as I'd been, I couldn't remember.

I grew cold beneath the blanket, frightened. I didn't want to be Brujah, I wanted to be Tremere, like Micky.

"How do we know?" I asked.

Elvira gave me a long look. "The Blood Walk," she said.

"And if she's not my childe?" Micky asked quietly.

A knock came at the door and she went to it without answering Micky's question. Zane entered at her request and stood awkwardly near the door.

"My prince," he told her respectfully, "Aislynn returned Sarah's car to Alex's shop. He told her he would see that she got it, but a few minutes later it was stolen. We're looking for it now, but it may take some time. All the remaining Brujah in the city have been accounted for, they're at David's bar and have been there since sundown."

"Very good, Zane. And the bodies?"

"The clean up crew has been to the warehouse and Alex was able to stash the bodies left at his store until they can get there." Zane looked at me for the first time. "How is she?"

I looked away, unable to meet his gaze. I had been uncomfortable around Zane since the night in the garage when we had both learned hard lessons.

"She's fine," Micky said coolly. There was still tension between them, but Micky was handling it well.

Another knock sounded on the door and Elvira motioned Zane to answer it.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Micky asked me softly.

I laid my head back on the pillows and closed my eyes. "I'm fine," I lied. I felt drained and wanted nothing more than to sleep.

A few minutes later Elvira came back to the bed. "Sarah," she queried softly, "if you saw this man, this Wyatt again, would you recognize him?"

His face flashed in my mind. "Yes."

"I want to bring Bruce in here for you to look at," she told me. "Remember who he is?"

"Brenda's."

"Don't be afraid, Sarah," she reassured me. "No one can hurt you now."

"I know."

I heard the door open and several people walk in.

"Sarah," Elvira called softly.

I opened my eyes and looked at her warily. In my peripheral vision, I saw Zane sitting in a chair across the room, and Brenda standing by the fireplace.

"Remember," Micky reminded me, "don't be afraid."

I nodded and turned my head to the other person in the room. I stiffened and felt the fear try to take over my mind, but fought the paralyzing emotion. Micky squeezed my hand and I was grateful that he was beside me.

While Bruce did resemble Wyatt quite closely, he was clearly not the same person. It was obvious after closer examination that Bruce was a bit older, more muscular, and blond where Wyatt's hair had been dark. As I studied the quiet Kindred, my fear left me. Somehow, I knew that Bruce wouldn't hurt me.

"It's not him," I whispered. "This one's older, blond." I looked at Micky and he gathered me into his arms. I refused to let myself cry any more and lay silently against him. I heard the others leave and closed my eyes, allowing myself to relax for the first time.

Everything was different now, but one thing had remained the same. I still loved Micky, and now I knew that I loved him for who he was, not because of some bond he held over me. I could love him freely now without hesitation.

After a while, I drifted off to sleep in his arms.

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A BROTHER'S LOVE

SO STEP THIS WAY AND LET YOUR MIND BE FREE
AND BY THE WAY WELCOME TO THE PARTY
WELCOME TO THE PARTY - KID ROCK

When I awoke a bit later, I was alone. I got up and walked across the hall to the bedroom I shared with Micky. I took a quick shower and dried my hair and pulled it back in a ponytail. I dressed plainly in slacks and a sweater.

When I was done, I felt much better, except for a thirst that plagued the back of my mind. I had no idea what the protocol was for feeding, so I went downstairs looking for Micky.

As I approached the living room, I heard voices raised in argument, so I stopped to listen.

"I don't think now would be a good time," I heard Brenda say, "but she does need to know."

"No," Micky replied firmly.

"I disagree," I heard an unfamiliar voice say. "This shouldn't be kept from her."

"I do believe she has a right to know," Brenda agreed.

I walked into the doorway. "I have a right to know what?"

Silence filled the room. Micky stood by one of the front windows, visibly upset. Bruce sat in an overstuffed chair across from the couch Elvira and Brenda sat on.

Micky looked like he felt he had to protect me for my own good. Brenda seemed guilty of something and wouldn't meet my eye. Bruce studied me closely as if he recognized me from somewhere. Elvira was calm, and gestured for me to come and sit by her side. Cautiously, I did so.

"How are you feeling, Sarah," Brenda asked.

"Much better, thank you." I ignored the hunger I felt. "What's going on?"

Brenda leaned down and picked up a shopping bag from beside the couch. She handed it to me and I recognized it as the one I had gotten from Alex.

"Your purse is in the bag," she told me. "Can you check to make sure everything is there?"

I nodded and took the purse from the bag. I set the purse on my lap and the bag by my feet. It took only a few minutes for me to determine that nothing was missing from the purse, even my cash was still in my wallet. I opened the bag and checked to make sure all three albums were inside.

"Everything is here," I replied. "Did you find my car?"

"More or less," Elvira said.

"It was left at the end of the drive about half an hour ago," Micky said from the window. He seemed upset. "We don't know who left it there or why."

"Well, its nice that I got it back," I said.

I was confused by Micky's behavior: had I done something wrong, something to anger him? He wouldn't even look at me.

I looked from Brenda to Bruce and remembered their words.

"What are you trying to hide from me?" I asked Micky.

Brenda looked at Elvira. "What makes you think—"

"I heard you, Brenda," I told her sharply. "Tell me what you're hiding."

"Maybe you should wait a little while," she suggested, "until you feel stronger."

Irritation shot through me. "I feel fine," I told her. "Micky, please tell me what's going on."

He glanced at me for a moment, then shook his head and turned back to the window.

I looked at Elvira. "My prince?" I asked.

"Brenda," she said after a pause, "give it to her."

Reluctantly Brenda pulled an envelope from under a pillow at her side. As she handed it to me, I saw written in bold dark letters across the front "Sarah (if she's dead, then Micky)."

With misgivings, I opened the envelope and took out a letter written on stationery from The Western Hermitage Hotel in Nashville, Tennessee. It was dated with today's date, and its one long paragraph faded in and out as if the pen used to write it had been running low on ink. The letter was unsigned, but I knew it was from Wyatt. What I read chilled me to the bone.

Dear Sarah,

By now, my sister, my love, you are either dead or much changed. If you are dead, you will never read this note, so I must assume, pray, that you are changed. How does it feel, sweet sister? Do you enjoy the power rushing through your veins? The control you have over others? The great speed with which you can now move? Exciting, isn't it. Given your history, I never thought you would associate with killers such as you now are, but the past few months have changed more than your mortality. Yes, love, I have watched you. I've watched you since you were born into this world to our parents. Did you ever wonder why they began to hunt? Of course, you didn't know they hunted as you went through your childhood. Father Abraham told you a few short years ago. I wondered, dear sister, what you would do and you didn't disappoint me. Did you feel excitement when you killed for the Inquisition, dear sister? I know what you are thinking. Our dear parents never told you that you had a brother. I was born to them in their early years, and what a disappointment I was! You were so much better for them, sister dear, a shining example of adolescents. They had such hopes for you! Isn't it a shame that you have become the very thing they despised? But I was telling you why they hunted. It began with me, of course. I accepted my embrace with all the enthusiasm and gratefulness I had. And they hated me for it, can you believe it? I loved them and they hated me, hated me so much they came to my haven years later and died for what they believed in. Don't be so shocked, my love. I killed them, I admit it. They deserved to die sister, they shut me out of their lives and kept me from you. Abraham knows about me, knows that they kept you from me and I killed them. Ask him and he will tell you. Nothing will keep you from me now, nothing. You are one of us, a predator, a killer. Do you like it, Sarah? To know that you are truly a hunter now, a hunter of blood? I imagine you are angry with me for forcing the change on you this way, but you must know I had to. Otherwise you would have gone and let the mistress of Salem embrace you, then I would have had to destroy you. Love, you understand that I had to leave you in the warehouse, if I had taken you, your darling warlock would have searched forever for you. If you leave him willingly...Ah, I believe you begin to see. I know there is fire burning in your blood now, sister, fire that will never be satisfied with a weakling like him. He sings, for Cain's sake! How can you think that you love a pussy like that? I know how you should be treated, Sarah, sister, love. I know what you need to be happy and I will give it to you. I can make up to you the loneliness of your childhood and fuel the fire within you. Come to my city and I will find you. Come to me, Sarah. Come to me and together we will rule America's city of music. Come to me and it will be as it should have been all these years. Come to me, Sarah, come to me.

CHANGES

CAUSE WHAT YOU GET IN LIFE YOU TAKE IT
YOU'VE GOTTA HOLD ON AND MAKE IT LAST
JUSTICE IN THE BARREL - JON BON JOVI

When I had finished reading the letter, Micky knelt at my feet. "Why did you want to keep this from me?" I asked him.

"Sarah," he soothed, "I knew it would hurt you. I wanted to protect you from these lies." He took my hand and kissed the center of my palm.

"He says I should ask Father Abraham about the truth, Micky," I whispered. "How am I supposed to do that?" I didn't dare even call Abraham after what had happened tonight.

"Are you hungry, Sarah?" Brenda asked suddenly.

Startled, I looked at her and when she repeated her question, I nodded.

Bruce got up and brought me a jar half-filled with a dark red liquid. I took it from him and looked down into it. The smell made me ravenous and I knew it was blood.

"Drink, Sarah," Micky prompted softly.

Hesitantly, I brought the jar to my lips. I sipped at the cold substance, unsure of my reaction. When I tasted the blood, something inside of me sang with joy. I emptied the jar and gasped when it was gone, instantly wanting more. I stared at Micky, confused at the emotions running through my mind.

"Perhaps the taste of blood would do the trick, my prince," Brenda suggested.

"Perhaps," Elvira replied. "Micky, would you?"

Micky glanced at her, then looked back at me and took my hand. "Don't be afraid," he told me with an exaggerated leer, "I just need to bite you."

I laughed softly, remembering the passionate nights that we had spent together, the feel of Micky's teeth in my breast.

Slowly Micky raised my hand to his lips and seductively bit into the flesh beneath my thumb. I jumped at the sensation, then shivered as he licked the wound closed.

Micky closed his eyes for a moment, and when he opened them, he looked disappointed. He looked up at Elvira and shook his head. "I don't know," he told her. "She is still hungry, we need more blood."

Elvira went to the door and gestured to a servant in the hall. When he returned a moment later, he had a jar in his hands and Ford by his side.

Elvira went to her sire and kissed him on the cheek. "Ford, I'm glad you could come so quickly."

"It sounded urgent, my childe," Ford replied.

Micky bowed slightly in Ford's direction but stayed at my feet. "Sir," he said with great respect.

"How are you doing, son?" Ford asked him.

Micky glanced at me. "Could be better, sir."

Brenda rose and stepped to Ford's side. He bent to kiss her cheek in greeting. "And how are your studies going, my dear?" he inquired.

"Well, sir," she replied.

"Ford" Elvira said, "this is Bruce Blackwell, the gentleman we discussed last night."

As Bruce rose to his feet, Ford examined him thoroughly.

"I hope you know the risk Elvira takes for you, Lord Blackwell," Ford told him gravely.

Bruce bowed deeply. "I do, sir, and I would protect my Queen with my life."

"See that you do," Ford replied, his tone an obvious warning. "See that you do."

Ford looked at me finally, and motioned for me to keep my seat as he approached. He sat by my side and took my hand from Micky while watching my face intently.

"I'm happy to see you again, Sarah," he told me, "although these circumstances are nearly as grave as the last time I saw you. I understand you had some difficulties this evening?"

"Yes, sir," I whispered, unable to meet his eyes.

"Please, call me Ford. I'm not too old to appreciate a pretty girl such as yourself."

"Ford," I said as I looked up at his kind face.

"Tell me what happened," he said softly, "every thing you can remember."

Haltingly I told him of the events that had taken place. He asked pointed questions and I found myself remembering far more than I had earlier. When the story was told, I realized that Ford would have made an excellent government agent.

"And now," Ford stated bluntly, "we wonder if Micky got to you in time."

He gestured for the jar the servant had brought. He handed it to me and told me to drink. When I did, he gave the jar to Micky and instructed him to rinse it out at the bar against the wall.

"Do you understand what the prince wants me to do?" he asked me.

"No, sir."

"There is a ritual that will determine exactly who your sire is. Depending on the success of the ritual, I may even find out your grand sire and great grand sire. I only need a bit of your blood and the use of Elvira's lab for a few hours."

Ford took the clean jar from Micky and pulled a knife from his sleeve. "Don't be afraid," he told me, "this won't hurt."

Gently he raised my arm and slid the knife into my wrist. He handed the knife to Micky and filled the jar with my blood. When he was done, he gestured for me to close the wound. I licked the cut and to my surprise, it healed instantly.

Ford nodded and rose to his feet with the jar. "If I may use your lab?" he asked Elvira.

"Of course," she replied as she led him out of the room.

"Micky, what if—" I started to ask, but he put a finger across my lips.

"It doesn't matter, baby," he told me as he sat down at my side. "All that matters is that I didn't lose you."

I smiled and leaned into his shoulder.

"Sarah," Brenda said softly, "you're probably still hungry, would you like me to help you?"

I looked at her outstretched hand and, after a glance at Micky, took it. I allowed her to lead me from the room and up the stairs. We went to the third floor servant's quarters, and Brenda knocked briskly on one of the doors. Mrs. Rogers, an older woman I'd seen in the house several times, opened the door.

"Miss Thompson?" she inquired. "What can I do for you?"

"Miss Hamilton has need of your assistance," Brenda told her. I knew that the staff was used as herd when necessary, but I hadn't fully thought about the details.

Mrs. Rogers looked at me in surprise. "Sarah? But I thought—"

"She was," Brenda answered swiftly, "but there have been some changes."

"I see. Please, come in." She stepped back to let us in and Brenda asked the woman to sit down on the bed.

"This will be Miss Hamilton's first time," she told Mrs. Rogers.

"I understand."

I sat down in a chair beside the bed and looked at the woman. She reminded me of my mother.

"You know how this works, Sarah," Brenda said kindly. "From the wrist would be the best place for you to begin."

Mrs. Rogers held her arm out to me and I took it hesitantly. I sat there, holding her hand, feeling the hunger burn inside of me.

"Miss Hamilton," the woman said quietly, "I know that you were close to Mr. George, and I'm sure that your experience with the 'kiss' was a positive one. I enjoy it very much, as I'm sure you did when Mr. George fed from you. From what I understand, it is pleasurable for the Kindred as well."

"Thank you," I told her. I slowly lifted her wrist to my mouth and felt the fangs extend against my lips. Carefully I pressed my teeth into her flesh and felt her warm blood fill my mouth.

I closed my eyes and lost myself to the taste and heat of her blood. Dimly I heard Brenda talking to me, coaching me on how fast to drink and how much to take.

I had thought my body had sung when I'd drunk from the jar, but that had been nothing like this. Now every sense cried out in ecstasy as I swallowed slowly, lingeringly.

When Brenda told me it was time to stop, I did so with great reluctance. I instinctively licked the woman's wrist to close the punctures and released her hand.

Mrs. Rogers swayed a bit, and Brenda helped her to lie down on the bed. She smiled up at me with a look of contentment on her face and thanked me.

The room spun around me for a moment and I was glad to be sitting down. I put a hand to my forehead and closed my eyes. I had drunk blood from a human! Tears filled my eyes and I wondered what my parents would have thought to see how far I had fallen.

Brenda put a hand on my shoulder and steadied me as I rose. She led me quietly out of the room and down the hall to another door, where she again knocked briskly. Terry, a young man barely out of his teens, opened the door. I had talked to Terry once or twice, and he seemed like a very intelligent person.

His blood scent enveloped me and I realized that while I still felt the hunger, it wasn't nearly as strong as it had been. Brenda again explained that I needed his assistance and he looked at me knowingly. He led us into his room and stood by his bed.

"Try the neck this time," Brenda suggested.

I walked over to the boy and he grinned at me. "I thought you'd change," he said, "Micky likes you."

I smiled in return. "I like him too."

"It's really very romantic." He said.

I nodded.

Terry stepped close to me and turned his head. He was a few inches taller than I was, which put his neck at a convenient level for me.

"I like this part," he whispered, "beautiful women wanting to suck on my neck."

I chuckled and put my hands on his shoulders to bring him closer to me. The fangs grew again, and again I took care in puncturing the flesh.

The boy's blood was different, fresh tasting, and young. Again, I lost myself in the 'kiss' until Brenda touched my shoulder to let me know I'd had enough. I closed the wound and stepped back, supporting Terry when he swayed on his feet.

"And they make me weak," he said smiling, "then leave me."

I sat him on the bed and made sure he would be okay.

Brenda and I quietly left the room and I leaned back against the closed door, confused by everything that had happened to me. I wasn't sure what I'd thought being a vampire would be like, but I never dreamed it could be like this.

"How are you doing?" Brenda asked.

I shook my head. "I don't know."

"Are you still hungry?"

"Maybe," I replied, "but I'm not sure I can do that again tonight."

"Normally you won't have to feed so much in one night," she told me. "Can you wait here for a minute?"

I nodded and watched Brenda knock on a third door. I waited while she entered, and when she came out a few minutes later her face was slightly flushed. I wondered if I looked like that.

We went downstairs to Brenda's room and she took a blood jar from a small refrigerator and gave it to me. We talked quietly while I sipped at it, then she asked me if I had something on me of Micky's.

"Why?" I asked.

"I think we should try a Tremere ritual," she suggested.

I took off my necklace and she asked me to hold it in my hand. I repeated the words she spoke and concentrated on the pendant pressing into my palm. After a few minutes, I felt something shift in my head.

Sarah? I heard distantly.

Micky! I replied, trying to concentrate and improve the connection. *Micky.*

I heard a loud rushing noise in my head and put a hand over my ears. Then Micky's voice came again, louder this time.

Sarah!

I gasped as the connection broke and leaned heavily on the bed.

"What happened?" Brenda demanded.

"I don't know," I whispered. "I heard..."

"What?"

"It was very faint, but I think I heard Micky."

"Let's go see," she said quickly.

We rushed downstairs and met Micky coming out of the living room. He opened his arms and I stepped into them gratefully.

"I heard you," he whispered in my ear. "I heard you."

"What happened?" Bruce asked from the living room.

"Sarah was able to perform a ritual that allowed her to communicate with Micky telepathically," Brenda replied smugly.

Micky's arms tightened around me as he looked over my shoulder at Elvira. At that moment, an older man approached us in the hall and looked at Elvira expectantly.

"Yes?" she prompted.

"We have him."

"Wonderful," Elvira exclaimed. "Put him in the interrogation chamber."

"Who?" Brenda asked.

"Someone Sarah wanted to speak with," Elvira replied, looking at me.

I was confused. "Who?"

Elvira walked down the hall, saying only, "Come and see."

The five of us followed her down to the subbasement and into the interrogation chamber.

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FATHER ABRAHAM

I TOLD THE PRIEST 'DON'T COUNT ON ANY SECOND COMING
GOD GOT HIS ASS KICKED THE FIRST TIME HE CAME DOWN HERE SLUMMING'
TOMORROW, WENDY – CONCRETE BLONDE

Two large kindred were chaining a man to an overhead shackle. The man's head was covered but it looked as if he were wearing a priest's garments. Suddenly I knew who it must be and walked forward to take off the hood. Micky grabbed my hand and shook his head at me.

"We can't just leave him like that," I hissed softly.

"Yes we can," Micky whispered. "Remember the basement of St. Stephen's? How he froze me with a look?"

I swayed on my feet when I remembered Jacob's dying face so close to mine. Micky pulled me close and cradled me against his chest.

"Who's there," Father Abraham demanded. "I can hear you, who are you?"

I looked at Elvira who nodded at me while restraining Brenda from going to Abraham.

"Father?" I said softly.

"Sarah?" He spun toward my voice. "By the Christ, I thought you were dead!"

I smiled with little mirth: I was dead.

"I'm fine, father. Are you okay?"

"How did you find out so soon that they took me?" He asked. "Let me down, you can explain everything later."

"I'm afraid I can't do that, father," I said sadly. It occurred to me how close our conversation was running to the one I'd had with Micky the first night he'd come to me in the cell.

"Sarah?"

"Father, what do you know of my brother?" I asked.

"Wyatt?"

"Yes."

"Sarah, let me down and I'll tell you everything we need to know when we're safe."

Abraham began to struggle in the cuffs.

"I can't, father."

He grew still. "There are still vampires here, aren't there, Sarah," he said softly. "You won't let me go because you're with them."

I shifted uneasily and Micky moved up close behind me to put his hands on my shoulders.

"Tell me about Wyatt, father," I urged.

"Take off the hood so that I may see the serpent in my midst," he demanded. "Let me look at your face and know you for a traitor!"

I leaned back against Micky's strength, my heart aching with guilt. "You know I can't, father."

"Why, Sarah?" Abraham asked harshly. "Why did you betray us? Jacob loved you and you murdered him!"

"Sarah did not kill the boy," Micky growled. "I killed him."

I closed my eyes and remembered Jacob's dying breath.

"Did you drink this vampire's blood, Sarah? Is that why he has a hold over you?" Abraham asked. "We can break the bond, Sarah, I can help you escape him."

My laugh was low and hoarse.

"Just tell her what she needs to know of her brother," Micky demanded hotly.

"I do not speak to demons," Abraham retorted.

"Please, father," I whispered. "I must know."

"Take the hood off, Sarah," he answered, "and I'll tell you."

I looked pleadingly up at Micky, but he shook his head.

"No way, priest," Micky told him firmly. "We both know what you can do given the chance for eye contact. Just tell her what she wants to know and I promise that we'll let you go."

"Vampires are a contamination of the flesh and must be removed from the earth," Abraham spat. "I don't converse with evil, I slay it."

"You're talking to me," I reminded him.

"Are you evil, Sarah?" he asked softly, his head cocked to listen for my answer.

"I'm no longer human," I whispered. "I'd like to think I'm not evil."

Abraham didn't answer.

Elvira and Brenda walked over to the shelves that lined one wall. They returned with a large boot shaped object that Brenda dropped at Abraham's feet.

"They're going to hurt you, father," I said urgently, my voice catching. "Please tell me what I need to know."

"Take off the hood so that I may see the malignancy you've become," he answered coldly.

Brenda crouched and grabbed Abraham's foot firmly. He fought while she removed his shoe and sock, but he was no match for Brenda's strength. She forced his foot into the device and tightened it until it was snug around his foot.

"Please, father," I begged.

"The hood," he replied.

Brenda tightened the screws on the boot and I watched Abraham stiffen in pain. He didn't make a sound. Again, Brenda tightened the screws and again Abraham jerked, but he didn't cry out.

Bruce spoke up from behind us. "Enough. There are better ways to do this."

Brenda glanced up at him in surprise, then looked to Elvira for confirmation. Elvira shrugged and gestured for Brenda to rise.

Bruce motioned us to the far wall of the room, behind Abraham. When we had gone where he wanted, a large cloud of darkness surrounded Abraham's head.

Bruce reached into the cloud and removed the hood. "The hood is off, father. Tell Sarah what she wants to know."

"Demon," Abraham spat. "Let me look upon her and I will tell her about the boy."

"You asked that the hood be removed before you spoke," Bruce replied calmly. "It is off. Are you not a man of your word?"

"I do not bargain with evil, demon," Abraham said.

"Apparently you do not keep your word, either," Bruce retorted.

"It is no sin to lie against evil."

"Sarah is not evil," Bruce told him. "Like me, she was attacked and forced into a life of darkness. Her brother did this to her, turned her into a creature of the night. She seeks to find him, to destroy him even as she was destroyed."

"Wyatt was here? In Salem?" Abraham asked, stunned.

"Yes," Bruce replied. "He forced the embrace upon her. Now we desire to hunt this monster, and to exterminate him."

"That would be good," Abraham said. "He is indeed an abomination."

"Then it is true that he is her brother?"

Abraham sighed. "Wyatt was born when the Hamilton's were very young. He was always a headstrong child, always in trouble. He returned from college when he was twenty-three, a vampire. David and Elisabeth tried to kill him, but they were inexperienced and he escaped.

"Sarah was only a baby and they never told her about him. They wanted to spare her the knowledge of his existence. They approached me in Minneapolis where I was just beginning my membership in the Society. They became hunters, killing evil where they found it and always searching for their son.

"When Sarah was seventeen, they found him. They flew to Nashville to kill him, but never returned. I went to Sarah and told her that they had died in a car accident. I arranged for empty caskets to be buried in their names. Years later I told Sarah the truth about what had killed her parents, but not who."

"They went to this...Nashville?"

"Yes."

"When did you last hear from them?" Bruce asked as he walked closer to Abraham.

"They called me from their hotel," Abraham replied. He twisted a bit in his chains to bring Bruce directly in front of him.

Suddenly the cloud of darkness was gone. Before anyone could move, a dark wall had sprung up between our group and Abraham. Bruce was on the other side of that wall.

"Will you let me go now, or kill me, demon?" Abraham asked. He seemed surprised about something and I could only assume his freezing gaze had somehow had no effect on Bruce.

"I vowed we would let you go and we will do so," Bruce replied.

From the direction of the doorway to the chamber, I heard a noise.

"What's going on?" I heard Ford ask.

A moment later, Bruce spoke again. "Obviously we must needs take care that you do no harm while we return you to your home."

Elvira walked to the wall again and picked up a hypodermic needle and a small vial. She filled the vial with liquid and handed it to Brenda, who walked to the dark wall and put her hand through it to show Bruce the needle.

The wall began to move away from us slowly and Brenda followed it, keeping her eyes downcast. She was ready when the wall dropped and she plunged the needle into Abraham's shoulder. A moment later he was unconscious.

Elvira gasped and we all turned to the doorway. Ford stood frozen, staring off into space. Bruce reached him before Elvira and he waived his hands in front of Ford's eyes. There was no response.

Bruce tapped Ford lightly on the cheek and he blinked, swaying. Elvira grabbed his arm and steadied him before he could fall.

Ford turned to look at her slowly. "Interesting."

"Are you alright?" she asked him.

"Yes, my dear. I'm fine," he replied, patting her hand. "But I need to talk to you privately."

I turned and leaned against Micky's chest and his arms circled my waist. I didn't know what Ford had found out, but at this point, it didn't look good.

"Of course," Elvira replied.

She turned and gestured to Abraham. "Boys," she told the two who had brought the priest in, "drop this off at St. Stephen's."

The pair removed the boot from Abraham while Micky led me out of the room. He took me upstairs to the parlor and closed the doors before joining me on the couch.

"Micky, what if I'm Brujah?" I asked.

"You'll still be my Sarah," he said, hugging me close to his side. "No matter what happens."

We sat together in silence and waited for Elvira.

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ANSWERS

I'LL PICK UP THE PIECES
AND MEND MY HEART
MAYBE I'LL BE STRONG ENOUGH
KISSING A FOOL - GEORGE MICHAELS

Over an hour later, Elvira and Ford finally joined us. Elvira sat in her large winged back chair while Ford stood at her right hand and I was reminded of the night that I'd first met them.

"My prince?" Micky said softly.

"Ford has performed the ritual," Elvira said. "I will allow him to share the results with you." Her expression was impossible to read.

"Never in my existence have I seen anything like what I experienced tonight," he told us. "To see yourself that way through the spell...and the rest also was absolutely amazing."

"Then—she is Tremere?" Micky asked.

"Yes," he replied, "and no."

"I don't understand," I whispered.

"During the ritual, for the first time I witnessed the actual embrace of the subject. I watched you fight them, Sarah. I felt your pain as they drained the life from you, felt your joy when you heard Micky's voice, your despair when Butch buried his fangs in your neck. I tasted his blood and Micky's in your mouth and observed as together they changed you.

Micky looked stunned. "Together?"

"She is not Tremere," Elvira said softly. "She is not Brujah. Some how she is both. We have only heard of one other case of a Kindred with mixed bloodlines, a Gangrel-Tremere mix. It is most fascinating, really."

I looked from Micky to Elvira and back. "What does this mean?"

Elvira ignored my query and looked at Micky.

"Mitchell," she said firmly, "for your actions tonight I could have you exiled from my city and you would not be welcome in any Tremere Chantry. Sarah was not in any condition to choose her fate or to recite the vow we both know is required at the time of the embrace. If it were not for the urgency of the situation, I would at the very least punish you as I punished Zane not so long ago."

I felt tension grow in Micky's body at her words and tried to hold him back but he pulled away to kneel at her feet.

He lowered his head and kissed her ring gently. "I understand, sire."

She laid her other hand on his head. "Given the circumstances, and the fact that you are a favored childe, this incident will not be reported to the council. By anyone."

Micky looked up quickly. "Sire?"

"Sarah will drink the blood of the seven now, tonight. When she has given the Tremere vow freely, we will never mention her bloodline again."

She glanced at me, then looked back at Micky with narrowed eyes. "I know that she means much to you, my son, as much as you mean to me. In addition, I do owe her a life boon, which this will repay in full. However, I cannot have her or you in my home any longer."

"My prince—" Micky cried, jumping to his feet, but Elvira continued over his words and continued to grip his hand although I could tell he was trying to pull away from her.

"This house is entirely too small for the number of people that I am obliged to provide a haven for," she mused. "I believe I recently acquired a home near the docks, one that has adequate living quarters for Kindred, and an established business on the main floor."

"Sire?" he asked, not sure of what she was offering.

"Far East Imports, I believe the business is called," Elvira told him with a smile. "The house has offices and a few small showrooms, but the bulk of the venture is run out of a warehouse I believe you have had some recent dealings in. You know I have no head for business, and I need someone to look after my interests."

Micky laughed softly. "If you have no head for business, sire, then I can't sing. However, I would be more than happy to assist you by taking over the company."

She finally released his hand and caressed his cheek. "You are one of the few Kindred I know that I can trust implicitly," she told him. "Many would call me a fool, but such is the love I bear for you, and you for her. Stand now and lead your childe through the words that will make her Tremere, regardless of the blood that turned her."

Micky led me to kneel before Elvira and Ford furnished the same vial I had seen Zane drink from. With reverence, I repeated the vows that inducted me into the Clan Tremere. When it was done, Elvira took my hand and helped me to my feet. She kissed me on each cheek, then on the mouth.

"Even as I embraced Mitchell into this life, he has embraced you. May your life with him be as sweet as the blood you share."

"My thanks, my prince," I whispered as I bent to kiss her ring.

"Now," she said, "let's see what you can do."

After a few simple tests, we determined that I did have Thaumaturgy, the Tremere discipline of magic. I had begun to develop it in the weeks I'd been with Micky at the house, and now it was stronger. I also was able to dominate human minds and my strength, which had grown when I had been ghoulé to Micky, was even greater.

I'd thought we were done when I turned to see Ford throw a knife directly at Micky's heart.

"No!" I reached out and to my amazement, I caught the knife a fraction of an inch from Micky's chest. I stood staring at the knife for a moment, unsure how I had snatched it out of mid air.

"Interesting," Elvira said softly. "That's not an inherent Tremere discipline, you'll have to hide it, my dear."

"Why did you do that?" I asked of Ford, struggling to keep my voice respectful, but angry that he had risked Micky to test me.

Micky put his arm around my shoulders. "I knew it was coming," he told me. "I was ready for it."

I looked up into his beautiful hazel eyes. "You would have been hurt if I hadn't caught it."

"Yes," he admitted, "but I'm Kindred, I would have healed quickly."

I laid my head on his shoulder, saddened by his willingness to endure injury just to test the limits of my skills.

"I have a few things to see to," Elvira told us, "but I want to make this clear. As far as anyone is concerned, Sarah, you were embraced Tremere. You are to curtail your speed and strength whenever possible, for they are not Tremere disciplines. Your other powers are weak, but we will work on them.

"Regardless, no one is to know that Micky is not your full sire, no one is to know the truth about what occurred tonight. Malachi is being brought here now and I will tell him that his

clan mates failed and that Micky reached you in time to bring you hear for your Tremere vow and embrace."

"I understand, my prince," I replied.

"It will be as you wish, sire," Micky added.

Elvira nodded, and Ford followed her out of the room. I returned to the couch and sat down, suddenly weary. Micky knelt in front of me and took my hands in his.

"Baby," he whispered, "everything will be alright."

"How can it be, Micky?" I asked him. "Things were complicated enough before, but this..."

"You're still the same, Sarah," he told me. "The girl I love."

"Am I? I don't feel like the same Sarah that vowed to eradicate evil, or the Sarah who drank from you and betrayed everything she knew." I wiped at the tears on my cheek and realized that they were the color of blood.

"I can't say I'm human anymore, Micky, I can't even truthfully say I'm Tremere. How can I be the same?"

Micky rose to sit beside me and pulled me close. "You've done what you had to, Sarah," he whispered against my hair. "You came through for us, for yourself. That's what matters now."

"What about Wyatt?" I asked in a small voice. "What about him? He killed my parents and he's sick, he won't stop coming after me."

Micky's arms tightened almost painfully around me. If I'd been mortal, I would have been badly bruised. "You don't have to worry about him, baby," he said fiercely. "I'll take care of him for you."

Would he, I wondered, or would he be destroyed? I had seen the strength and speed that Wyatt was capable of, and I knew I couldn't survive if anything happened to Micky.

I thought furiously, trying to find a way to keep Micky away from Wyatt. A sentence from my brother's letter came back to me: *If you leave him...*

"Micky," I whispered, "do you remember the time we spent in the cell?" Mentioning it brought back the taste of his blood in my mouth, and I craved the feel of his lips on mine.

Micky nodded against my hair.

"Can we go back there? Just for tonight?" I pulled away and looked up at him beseechingly. "Where it really started for us?"

Silently he pulled me to my feet and led me downstairs. We made our way through the house and into the subbasement without being seen.

As Micky reached for the door to the cell, I grabbed his hand. "You know I love you, don't you?" I asked.

He smiled at me, the boyish grin I loved to see. "And I love you, Sarah." He kissed me gently, then turned and opened the door.

Using my newfound strength and speed, I pushed him into the cell and slammed the door closed. A moment after I shot the lock home, Micky's face appeared in the window.

"Sarah," he said, his voice muffled by the door, "what are you doing?"

"Keeping you safe," I replied. I touched the window near his face, although I knew he couldn't see me.

Anger exploded in his eyes and for a moment I doubted my actions. I took a deep breath and steeled myself to do what I had to.

"I'll be back, Micky," I told him, sorrow making my voice hoarse. "I'll come back to you, I swear it."

"Sarah!" he yelled as I turned and ran down the hall. "Don't go!"

I hardened my heart against his cries and quietly went upstairs to the second floor. I went to the bedroom Micky and I shared, and was gratified to see my purse lying on the bed beside the bag from Alex's shop. I took out the albums I had purchased and laid them on the bed. I touched Micky's face on each cover before I turned and quickly packed an overnight bag. With one last glance around the room I'd found such happiness in, I walked out.

I made my way down the back stairs to the delivery entrance and sauntered past the guards, walking quickly to my car without a backward glance. As I drove away, I told myself that I couldn't possibly still be hearing him call my name. I drove to the Boston Airport and got on the next flight to Nashville.

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NASHVILLE

SEE ME HIT YOU
YOU FALL DOWN
IT'S SO EASY - GUNS 'N' ROSES

The plane landed at the nearly deserted Nashville airport just after three a.m. The clerk at the rental counter gave me a dark sedan and directions to The Western Hermitage Hotel. I knew that I was probably walking into a trap, but it seemed the only way to find Wyatt.

I drove through the dark streets to the hotel thinking about Micky. I knew he was furious that I had locked him in the cell, but I hoped that no one would discover him until after I had settled things with Wyatt. However, I couldn't shake the feeling that I'd betrayed him by leaving him that way.

I parked the car and took my purse and overnight bag inside. I was glad that I had kept my Secret Service I.D., it had allowed me to board the plane with my weapons. Now I adjusted my load to keep the one at my back within easy reach.

When I reached the desk, a young man with dark hair and glasses took my name.

"Miss Hamilton," he said respectfully, "we have a room reserved for you on the third floor. Three fifteen."

"Reserved?" I hadn't called ahead; this was beginning to sound too much like the trap I'd expected.

"Can you change the room for me? I'd prefer something on the second floor."

The clerk typed for a few minutes on his keyboard then handed me a key card. When I tried to pay for the room, he informed me it had already been taken care of.

I walked to the elevator after a quick glance around the lobby. I still felt a little strange, and I wasn't quite sure of my abilities. I rode the elevator to the second floor and quickly found my room.

I used the key card and opened the door a crack. I pulled my weapon and eased my way inside the room, listening carefully for any intruders. After assuring myself I was alone, I closed and locked the door.

I put my bags down and picked up the telephone. I dialed room three fifteen and wasn't surprised when some one answered. I didn't recognize the rough voice.

"Hello?"

"Hey," I said in a high teenager's voice, "Is this Jaelyn?"

"No," the voice barked. "You have the wrong room."

"Oh," I replied. "No need to go postal. My bad."

I hung up the phone and sat down on the edge of the bed. Wyatt had planned a reception committee for me, had counted on me coming to Nashville. Had I made a mistake in coming alone?

I picked up the telephone again and called Elvira.

"Sarah?" Elvira asked a few minutes later when the maid had brought her the phone.

"My prince," I replied.

"Am I to assume it was you who locked Micky in the cell?" She sounded a little angry, and very amused.

"Yes, my prince."

"You knew he wouldn't let you go alone," she said.

"Yes."

"He's not very happy to be in there," she told me after a brief hesitation.

"You left him in the cell?" I knew it would take a little while for them to find him, but I thought they would let him out right away.

"Do you think he wouldn't have followed you to Nashville if I'd let him out?"

"You know where I am?"

"Yes," she replied. "I agree that Micky should not be there, but I am sending Brenda and Bruce. If you had waited a few hours, you could have flown with them in my jet."

"I didn't know that you would help me, my prince," I told her, "and I could think of no other way to keep Micky safe."

"Is that why you did it, Sarah?"

"Yes," I responded honestly. "Wyatt is my problem, I will destroy him if it's the last thing I do. I just didn't want it to be the last thing Micky did."

"Then you intend to return to Salem?" she asked softly.

"I do, my prince."

"You have tonight, Sarah," she informed me. "Brenda and Bruce will be there in a few hours. Tomorrow night I let him go, do you understand?"

"Yes, my prince."

"I expect you to be successful in this, my childe," she warned me. "Micky would not be tolerable if anything happened to you, and you know how fond I am of him."

I smiled. "I know, my prince. I will succeed, you have my word."

"You might want to call him," she suggested. "I made sure he had his cell phone, if you'll pardon the pun."

"I will."

"Good luck, then."

I heard a click end our conversation and dialed Micky's number. After many rings, he answered.

"What."

I almost didn't reply because of the anger in his voice. "Micky?"

"Sarah? Where the hell are you!" Still livid, but there was love in his voice. I felt a little better.

"I'm taking care of my brother," I told him.

"Sarah, baby," he said softly, "come and let me out. We'll go to Nashville and take care of your brother together."

Apparently Elvira hadn't told him where I was.

"That would be hard, my love," I replied, "as I'm already in Nashville."

"Damn it, Sarah," he exploded. "You can't do this alone, it isn't safe! You haven't even been changed for a night, you have no idea what you can and cannot do!"

I bristled at his words. "You're the one who told me that I'm still the same, remember? I was trained well by the government and the Society and I can handle Wyatt."

"Like you handled Michael?" he stated cruelly. "Like you handled me?"

I was silent as I felt numbness grip my heart in a chilling embrace.

"Look, Sarah," he said, instantly contrite, "I'm sorry. That wasn't fair of me. I just don't want anything to happen to you, I love you!"

"If you don't trust my abilities, Micky, why did you ghoulish me?" I knew my voice was cold but I couldn't forgive his words so easily. "If you didn't think I could make it as a Kindred, why did you embrace me?"

"If I hadn't given you my blood, you would have died," he reminded me, "or worse."

"Brujah," I stated. "Well, I'm half there, Micky, perhaps death won't be so bad."

"Sarah—"

"No," I interrupted, "you'd better stop before either of us say more things that we'll regret." Tears filled my eyes and I ached for his arms around me.

"I just want you safe, baby," he pleaded. "Come home, we'll do this together."

"I'll do this alone," I told him. "I love you."

As I hung up the phone, the door swung open. I jumped to my feet with my gun drawn, but I was alone. I looked out into the hall, but again, no one was in sight. I closed the door and examined the interior locks: they were broken.

I felt a chill run along my spine and turned to see an area of the room near the foot of the bed that looked somehow out of focus. Watching it for movement, I reached into the bathroom. I picked up a glass and threw it at the area, not surprised when it moved slightly and revealed a hideous figure standing there.

"What do you want," I demanded, pointing the gun at the creature.

"Don't I scare you, Sarah?" it asked, its overlong fangs distorting the words.

"I don't scare easily," I told it. "What do you want?"

"Put the gun down, Sarah," it replied. "We'll talk about it."

I stared at it, thinking it must be as insane as my brother was, then I realized my hand was dropping to point the gun at the floor.

"No!" I cried, bringing the gun up again and firing. The loud retort and subsequent explosion I'd expected never came, although I did see the bullet explode in the Nosferatu's chest.

The wound healed almost instantly.

"Sarah, put it down," it ordered, and to my horror, my arm fell to my side.

"What do you want" I repeated as I struggled to bring the gun up. It felt as if the gun now weighed a hundred pounds, and I had a hard time not dropping it to the floor.

"Wyatt wants you," the thing growled with a semblance of a smile as it walked toward me.

I took a step back and reached for the door.

"Stop, Sarah," it said, and, unbelievably, I did. It raised a hand before my face and I was frozen, unable to move away. I saw that it held a rose quartz in its deformed fingers, and it began to shine as I stared at it, powerless to look away.

As I gazed into the depths of the crystal, the room fell away and I was left standing in my old room at St. Stephen's. The Nosferatu had also metamorphosed, its grotesque features settling into Jacob's face.

"Sarah," the thing said in Jacob's sweet voice, "put away your gun and come with me. Father Abraham waits for us."

An idea hit me quickly: this thing thought I believed him and his illusions. I assumed he was going to take me to Wyatt, which was where I wanted to go anyway. If I let him think I was already under his spell, perhaps he wouldn't try any stronger tricks that I wouldn't be able to see through.

I walked as if in a daze, to the dresser and put my gun in a drawer, thankful for the smaller pistol at my ankle. "Let's not keep him waiting, Jacob."

For a moment I glimpsed the warped a twisted features of the vampire before Jacob's face swam back into focus.

I followed the creature downstairs, leaving everything behind in my room. We walked out of the hotel's rear exit and I began to shake off the illusions it had woven around me.

The parking lot was deserted except for a black Cadillac with two men standing nearby. The creature opened the back door of the car for me. "Father Abraham and Zane are going to take us hunting, Sarah, isn't that great?"

I glanced at the two Kindred and smiled. "Won't I need my gun?" I asked.

The taller Kindred I assumed was supposed to be Abraham handed me a pencil. "Use this," he said with a grin.

For a moment, the pencil appeared to be a .357 Magnum. "Super," I replied as I got into the car. The three vampires also got in and we sped away.

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LOSING CONTROL

THERE ARE THINGS WE CAN CHANGE
IF WE JUST CHOOSE TO FIGHT
BUT THE WALLS OF INJUSTICE ARE HIGH
HE DOESN'T SEE ME - SARAH BRIGHTMAN

The car drove through the dark streets of Nashville. I looked at the pencil in my hand and pretended to check and see if it were loaded. I tucked it into my waistband and remembered that even a pencil could disable a Kindred if placed in the heart.

We pulled into the drive of a large house and parked near the doors. When the others got out, I followed suit. The Nosferatu took my arm and led me into the house.

"We have to pretend friendship," it told me, "at first."

"Okay," I said, fingering the pencil.

We went through a large foyer and into a library. The room's furnishings were dark and masculine, but the books seemed neglected, dusty and unused.

Wyatt sat in a chair by the fireplace and turned when we entered. He smiled wickedly when he saw me. "You may release her," he told the Nosferatu.

I looked questioningly at the creature, waiting for a sign that he was 'releasing' me. When it lifted the crystal and whispered a few words in Latin, I shrieked and pulled away from him. One of the others laughed.

I turned to run out the door, but the other Kindred stood in my way. I screamed again and ran to the desk, on top of which I saw a sharp looking letter opener. I stumbled and fell against the desk, hastily shoving the opener up my sleeve.

I stood and looked at Wyatt as if for the first time since I'd entered the room. "You!"

"Dear sister," he purred, "welcome to my humble haven. So good of you to join me."

I threw back my head and laughed.

Wyatt glared at the others. "What is so amusing?"

"You, dear brother," I replied. "If I had known you would be so amusing, I would have begged you to take me from Salem."

"What do you mean?"

I kept my eyes on the three by the door and walked around the desk. "Did you really think I wouldn't see through the ruse the deformed one tried to pull on me?" I laughed again. "I am of your blood, after all."

"Yes," Wyatt said, pleased. "I should have known. You came willingly then?"

"Of course."

"Ah, it is as I'd always dreamed, Sarah, love," he purred, walking toward me.

I clasped my hands together at my waist, clutching the pencil with one hand and covering the movement with the other. "Tell me what you dreamed."

Wyatt smiled and I cringed inside. "I dreamed that we would be together, love, and that together we would rule Nashville. We would be friends, siblings, and lovers, as it should have been all these years."

My gut twisted at his sick words and I knew without a doubt he was insane. Had he always been thus? Or had the embrace sickened him? There was no way to know.

"When our parents came, I kept them for you, Sarah," he told me.

I jerked in surprise as his hands fell on my shoulders.

"I had to kill them, but I kept them for you, I knew you'd want to see them one last time." He smiled down at me, that strange light illuminating his eyes.

I was quick as I raised my hand and stabbed the pencil toward his heart, but he was quicker. He grabbed my hand just as the tip of the pencil pierced his chest.

Wyatt grabbed my hair and roughly twisted my head back, covering my mouth with his own. I struggled, but he was much stronger than I was and I felt his fangs penetrate my lips. I grew dizzy as he drew blood from my body.

Abruptly he released me and I fell to the floor. I remembered the gun at my ankle and rolled slightly to bring it into my reach. I let the knife from my sleeve drop into the palm of my other hand.

I made a quick roll to the left and fired at Wyatt, but he moved and the bullet merely creased his arm. I fired at the Brujah near the door and hit one in the head, the explosion decapitating him. I hit the other one in the stomach and soon the room began to fill with smoke from their burning bodies.

Wyatt reached for me and I slashed at him with the letter opener, then fired at the Nosferatu. Wyatt avoided the opener and grabbed my hand, pulling me off balance and forcing me to miss. I pointed the gun at his head, but he knocked it out of my hands. I watched it skid across the floor and relaxed in Wyatt's grip.

"Very good, Sarah," he said as he pulled me close to him.

I shrank back, but he was stronger than I was and he held me in place.

"I knew you were resourceful," he continued. "You do me proud."

"You realize of course," I told him, my chin high, "that this was a test of your abilities."

He looked at me questioningly.

"I had to be sure you were strong enough to keep me once you had me," I said softly. This time when I pulled away, he let me go. "How could I respect and love you if you didn't prove yourself to me?"

"Of course, you really need to find different...associates," I added. "These were much too slow. I do hope they weren't your childer."

Casually I walked over to my gun and picked it up. I tucked it into the back of my pants and looked for Wyatt's reaction.

He smiled at me as the bleeding in his shoulder came to a stop. "You are indeed worthy of me, Sarah. Together we will be invincible."

Wyatt threw back his head and laughed. He held out his hand to me and I buried the disgust I felt and took it. He pulled me to his side gently, then spun me faster than I could have believed possible and forced my wrist high behind my back. I rose high on my toes to relieve the pressure and felt him take the gun from my waistband. His tongue ran up the side of my neck and I tried to jerk away but he wouldn't allow it.

"Sarah, my dear," he whispered in my ear, "I will go to great lengths to prove that I am worthy of you. Even if that's not what you really want."

He turned me around and held me to his chest, his hand still keeping my wrist painfully high on my back. "We will be as one, you and I," he promised. "As it was meant to be, as it would have been if our dear parents had not interfered."

Wyatt tangled his hand in my long hair and forced me to look up at him. "That musician would never have made you happy, Sarah. He was Elvira's puppy, and it's best that you left him with her. How can you love a man you can beat?"

I glared up at Wyatt. "How indeed?" I drawled. My skin crawled in revulsion, but I forced myself to remain pliant in his arms.

He lowered his lips to mine and I couldn't stop myself from pulling away. With a vicious jerk he pulled my face to his and thrust his tongue in my mouth. If I had still been mortal, I would have gagged at the invasion. Reflexively, I bit down and tasted Wyatt's blood, bitter and cold in my mouth.

He reared back in surprise and laughed again. "That's my Sarah," he declared, blood shining brightly on his lips, "quite the spitfire."

With a brutal twist of my head he slammed his mouth back over mine. He forced his way between my lips and teeth and he sucked hard until he gained access to my tongue. His fangs quickly tore into my flesh and he became so engrossed in drinking from the fount of my wound, I believed he didn't notice that I never swallowed. I grew weak from the loss of blood until I was truly limp in his grasp.

At last, he looked down at me. With every ounce of will I could summon, I spit the blood from my mouth onto his face.

A split second later his fist hit my face like a freight train. I felt my jaw break beneath the onslaught and fell stunned to the ground. I tried to get up, but I was nearly senseless and the floor spun turbulently beneath me.

"See how she shows her love for me?" Wyatt asked the Nosferatu who still stood quietly just inside the room. "See how she begs me to establish my dominance over her?"

"Yes, my lord," the vampire replied.

"Bring me something to feed her," Wyatt demanded. "Something small."

My eyes rolled back into my head and for a time I knew nothing.

I woke to a sharp pain in my throat. In my state of confusion, it took me a few minutes to realize that Wyatt was kneeling beside me and had bit into my neck. I felt dizzy as he drained more blood from me, leaving me lying helpless on the floor.

Hunger surged through me as he pulled away. I looked at him with wide eyes and willed him to come closer so I could take back the blood he had stolen from me. Instead, he moved to the nearby couch and sat down next to a small boy. He seemed to be in a daze and he looked thin, hungry. He couldn't have been more than six or seven years old.

"Sister, dear," Wyatt stated calmly. "I understand that you have had experience with the blood bond when that Jester ghouléed you. Do you remember what that was like, my love?"

Slowly I rolled my eyes to look at him, unable to reply.

"I am unfamiliar with the sensation as it turns out I am unbondable. Convenient, isn't it?" he asked me as he ran a hand through the boy's hair.

"You must be feeling very hungry, sister dear. I have taken a large amount of blood from you tonight. You could feed from me," he told me with a smile, "which I would enjoy very much, or you can feed from this child."

Wyatt's words reaffirmed his insanity to me.

His laugh echoed through the room. "No matter what you choose, Sarah, it brings you closer to me. Drink of the boy and we both know you are hungry enough to kill him. Drink of me and you begin the blood bond. Perhaps it will help you to decide if you know that I plan to embrace the boy if you don't kill him."

The boy's mouth opened in a soundless protest, the first sign he'd given that he understood what was happening around him.

"I want to feel you drink the vitae from my body," Wyatt told me. "But I really want to watch you drain the boy."

I closed my eyes and fought the hunger that threatened to overwhelm me. I struggled to my knees and looked past the couch to the door. I swayed with the force of my thirst, but fought to dampen its blazing inside of me.

Wyatt took the boy's hand and spread his fingers. "I know your hunger, Sarah," he taunted. "Me or the boy? It's your choice."

I refused to look at him and pressed my trembling hands into the plush carpeting. Suddenly the clear scent of human blood filled the room. I shot a glance at the boy and was aghast to see that Wyatt had dug a deep wound into the palm of the boy's hand. Blood dripped to the floor as I watched in fascination. Unconsciously I licked my lips. I began to shake uncontrollably and felt the prick of my fangs against my lower lip.

Without warning, Wyatt scooped up the boy and dropped him to the floor in front of me. The smell of blood filled my nostrils and erased all thoughts from my mind but one; I must feed. Like a bird of prey I swooped down on the boy and shuddered as my teeth sank into his neck.

Fresh vibrant blood flooded my mouth. I had no control; I couldn't force myself to stop. I heard Wyatt laughing and closed my eyes, but still I drank. Within minutes, the boy was dead and I could drink no more.

Slowly I withdrew my fangs and released him. I used his blood to heal my jaw while I ran a hand down his face to close his eyes.

My hands contorted into claws of rage and swiftly I turned on Wyatt. My fingernails dug deeply into the skin of his face as I forced him backward. My knee drove into his stomach and he flew backward against the desk. I picked up a large book and threw it at him, but he dodged it and the book hit the wood with a large thud.

He laughed at me even as I threw another book directly at his face. I blinked and he was on me, forcing me to the ground. His body trapped me beneath him and he held both of my wrists above my head in one of his powerful hands.

I twisted and turned, but Wyatt was both stronger and faster than I was. I threw back my head to scream and felt his teeth nip at my throat. I froze.

"That's it, Sarah," he crooned against my skin. "Don't fight me and I won't drain you again. I have plenty of children here, but I don't think you enjoyed your little snack. Are you ready for another so soon?"

A sob tore from my lips and he laughed again. I felt his tongue move along the skin of my neck and shuddered in disgust.

"Admit it, sister," he whispered into my ear, "you long for that sorcerer to rescue you. You try to deceive me, but I see the longing for him in your eyes."

I bit back the reply I longed to spit at him. He saw my restraint and smiled.

"I still have friends in Salem, love. If you want, I can have him brought to you. We could have a feast, you and I—"

I bucked wildly beneath him, nearly throwing him off in my anger. "You will not touch him," I raged. "If you hurt him I will see us both dead!"

To my fury, Wyatt kissed my cheek, then gently bit into the side of my face and lapped at the blood that trickled down. "I love the taste of your anger, sister," he mumbled against my skin. "It fills your blood with poignant sweetness and tempts me beyond resistance."

I growled at him and tried to pull my face away, but with a cruel yank of my hair, he held my head in place. Slowly he licked at the wound until it closed.

"Remember that I have eyes on your puppy at all times," Wyatt warned me. "I know he didn't want to tell you about me, and that Elvira saw to it you knew. I know how you locked him in that cell; the same cell he'd held you in. I know that you called him tonight."

Startled, I looked up at him.

"Yes," he said with a smile, "you begin to understand my power. I could have him destroyed at any moment at my command. I know how much you think you care about him, sister. Really, it's quite disgusting. But you'll come around in time."

I shook my head.

"You will come around to my way of thinking, love, or he will die."

Fear gripped my heart. I closed my eyes and turned away, baring my throat to Wyatt in submission. Again I felt his tongue on my skin and I shook with helpless rage.

Wyatt stood and pulled me to my feet.

"It will be dawn soon, love. Let's go visit our parents, shall we?" He gripped my hand tightly and pulled me from the room.

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THE CAVE

CAN'T KEEP HOLDING ON THIS WAY
CAN'T GO ON ANOTHER DAY
HUNGRY - WINGER

I followed Wyatt numbly out to a car that was waiting for us in the drive. He got in beside me and held my hand as the driver took us to a large park downtown. When the car stopped, Wyatt dragged me from the car and started through the trees.

Frantically I looked around for some way to escape. As I glimpsed a dark figure in the trees, Wyatt tugged at me to keep up with him.

"Remember, love, he dies if you escape," Wyatt reminded me gleefully.

I turned to peer through the gloom for the figure I had seen, but it was gone.

We walked between two large rocks and into a cave. In complete darkness, Wyatt led the way into the earth. He hummed softly as we walked, the sound eerie in the darkness.

Eventually the tunnel lightened and we entered a large oval cave. I stumbled when we entered and I felt a wave of despair wash over me.

"I just love the ambiance of this place," Wyatt declared. "It fills me with joy!"

I nearly retched, overcome with feelings of anguish and hopelessness.

Then I noticed the bodies hanging from the ceiling. Nearly all of them were in various stages of decay. Some were nothing but bones and rags, while others looked like they had been hung only days ago. I looked around and was startled to realize there were dozens of them hanging throughout the cave.

I stumbled again as Wyatt tugged brutally on my arm. He led me to a pair of bodies that hung quite close together and stopped.

I looked up and gasped for air. I fell to my knees and stared up at the perfectly preserved bodies of my parents. Their clothing was in rags and their hands were tied cruelly behind their backs. Their hair hung in limp threads about their faces. Amazingly, they appeared to be alive!

Wyatt looked down at me in delight. "Aren't they beautiful?" he asked. "I saved them for you."

I watched horrified as my father opened his eyes and looked mindlessly down at me.

"They've waited for you, sister, aren't you happy?"

"No," I said sternly.

Wyatt looked down at me in surprise.

Slowly I raised my head and looked up at him in reproach. "These people kept us apart, brother, and you gave them eternal life?"

He released my hand and took a step back from the venom in my voice.

"We could have been together all these years. I would have loved you, completely, all that time. You rewarded them for taking you from me?" I stepped closer to Wyatt.

"How can you bear to let them exist day after day, knowing how much they hated us?" I demanded. "How can you think I'd be pleased?"

Wyatt looked up at our parents nervously. "I guess I never thought of it that way," he whispered.

"They don't deserve to live like us, brother," I urged. "They don't deserve immortality. You must destroy them."

From the corner of my eye, I saw a tear fall from my mother's eye. She looked down at me with love and I knew she realized what I was trying to do for them.

"Give me a knife, Wyatt. I will do this myself if you are not man enough to," I spat at him.

Pain exploded in my face when Wyatt's open hand impacted with my cheek. I fell to the floor in a crumpled heap, then pushed my hair off my face and sat up.

"Your hand is strong, brother," I taunted him, "is your will as strong? Can you kill these creatures who have made us suffer so much?"

He studied my face for a moment and I slowly ran my tongue out to clean off the blood his blow had brought to my lips. He smiled evilly.

Quickly he turned and strode to a large chair that stood nearby. He pulled a long sword from one of the arms and returned to stand before me, the blade pointed at the ground between us. For a moment I feared he would use the weapon on me.

"I had no idea you could be so vicious, my love," he told me with a smile. "I thought it would take time to fill you with righteous anger and cruel intentions. I see now that we are more alike than I had dared hope."

I looked up at my mother as Wyatt raised the blade. Her eyes spoke to me of her gratitude as Wyatt's mighty swing separated her head from her body. A second swing released my father from this life. Their bodies fell to the ground in a tangled heap while the heads danced away across the floor.

I reached out to touch my mother's withering hand. "I loved you," I whispered to them. "Rest in peace."

"No!" Wyatt cried in fury. I jumped back and the blade buried in the sand where I had sat.

"You played me for a fool!" he exclaimed in anger.

I laughed at him harshly. "I tested you, brother, and you failed. How can I love you now?"

He grabbed my hair and with a violent jerk pulled me to my feet. I reached for the sword but could only brush my fingertips against the hilt before he pulled me away from it. He dragged me to a cage I hadn't noticed and threw me inside. Quickly I spun for the door, but he slammed it shut in my face. I grabbed the bars and shook them, but they didn't move.

"My precious bird in a cage," he mused. "I wonder how long it will take for the anger and hunger to drive you to me?" He turned and walked a few feet away, then turned to look at me once more.

"Perhaps if your precious Micky were here, it would help to make you love me," he told me.

I shook the bars again. "You're sick," I told him. "How can you have watched me for years and still have no concept of who I am? If you hurt him I will hate you forever!"

"Hate is but the other side of the coin from love, my love," he told me with an evil grin.

I shuddered and silently watched him leave the cave. I knelt at the edge of the cage and stared at the bodies of my parents.

Eventually I realized that the cave was growing dim. I stood and looked around and realized that the cave had been lit by a row of torches along its edge. Now one by one those torches were going out.

I looked frantically at the bars of the cage. They were at least two inches thick and only four or five inches apart. There was no way I could break or bend them, no possibility for me to slip between them.

I dug in the sand at my feet and found more bars only inches beneath the surface. I bowed my head and knew there was no escape. Then I moaned and remembered Wyatt's words; my escape would only bring Micky's death.

Soon only one torch lit the desolate room, and then it too gutted out, leaving me in darkness with only bodies to keep me company. I shivered in apprehension.

I pulled my necklace from my collar and wrapped my fingers around the Jesters' symbol. Very softly, I whispered the words Brenda had taught me earlier that night. After a few minutes, I could sense Micky very faintly in my mind.

Micky, I called out to him, can you hear me?

Sarah? I could feel his anger and his love for me. *Where are you?*

I'm in Nashville, I told him.

I know that, he replied as I felt his rage grow. *Where in Nashville?*

I'm not sure. I tried to hide the terror I felt, but somehow he knew.

He has you, doesn't he, Sarah? Micky demanded. *That son-of-a-bitch!*

I was stupid, I admitted.

Where are you? What happened?

It's complicated, I told him. I could sense his fear for me and but couldn't think of a way I could ease his mind.

Are you in a cave? Micky asked.

Obviously, he had better control over our connection than I did.

Listen to me, Sarah, he told me, *Brenda and Bruce are in Nashville and they'll find you soon. Can you give me a clue as to where the cave is?*

I don't know, I replied. *There was a park and water. We walked between two rocks and into the earth.*

Elvira won't let me out, Sarah, but I swear I'll be there tomorrow. I'll find you and you'll be safe.

No! I called desperately. *You mustn't come; he'll hurt you! I couldn't bear it!*

Do you think I can bear that he has already hurt you?

I remembered the pain that Wyatt had caused me and winced. I began to cry softly in the darkness.

Abruptly I realized that my connection with Micky was growing weak. I fought to make it strong again, but it kept fading.

Micky, what's happening?

Can't you feel it, Sarah? he asked me softly. *Can't you smell the sunrise? It's here now, but it will be there soon.*

I found that I could indeed sense the sunrise, even though I was deep in the earth.

I love you, Micky, I told him desperately.

And I you, baby, came his faint reply before he was gone.

I threw back my head and screamed in frustration and rage. Soon after, the sun came up and I slept.

A VISITOR

THE WALLS ARE COLD AND PALE
THE CAGE MADE OF STEEL
MY OWN PRISON - CREED

I woke to the sound of movements in the darkness. Disoriented, I sat up and looked around, but I couldn't see anything in the blackness of the cave.

Then I heard a voice from the edge of the cage. "You okay?" a kind man's voice asked.

"Who are you?" I asked him.

"The enemy of my enemy..."

"...is my friend," I finished. "Are you his enemy or mine?"

The man laughed softly. "You're quick. Not too quick, I'm thinking, or you wouldn't be in this cage."

Hope rose within me. "Can you get me out?"

"Nah. James holds the only key and I'm not strong enough to break you out."

Despair washed over me and I choked back a sob.

"Don't worry too much, sister, the local slayer's gonna kill him."

I shrank back in fear. Could this be Wyatt playing games with me?

"That scared of the slayer?" he asked with a chuckle.

"Who are you?" I demanded in a trembling voice. "Why do you call me sister?"

"I'm Gabriel," he told me. "I-I don't mean to scare you. Charisma will take care of James tonight."

I shook my head in confusion. "Who is James?"

"The guy who locked you in here."

"No, that's Wyatt," I replied sharply.

"Wyatt, James, whatever he wants to call himself, he's still gonna die," Gabriel stated. "No need to worry yourself, sister."

I closed my eyes. "Why do you keep calling me that?" I cried softly.

"Sorry, I-I don't mean to offend," he said. "Normally I don't acknowledge my clan, but I know a Brujah when I see one. That's-that's all I meant."

"I'm not Brujah," I growled. "I'm not."

"Whatever you say, sister," he replied in disbelief.

I held out my hand and light flared brightly. When my eyes adjusted, I saw a tall dark man crouched outside the cage. His hair was tousled and he looked strong and handsome. He was definitely not Wyatt, and I could see the shock on his face.

"Whoa," he whispered. "Tremere?"

I nodded and smiled. "Told you I wasn't Brujah."

He shrugged. "James thinks you are and that's what counts. I wouldn't show him that little trick if I were you. You the girl from Salem?"

"Yes."

He turned toward the exit for a moment, searching for movement.

"Look, I-I gotta go meet Charisma. A couple of Kindred came into town tonight from Salem, a tall blond man and a brunette woman. Maybe we could team up with them to get you out."

"Brenda and Bruce," I said softly. "And Micky said he'd be here tonight."

"Well I can't say we'll wait for him, but if he shows, he'll be welcome."

Gabriel motioned to the cage bars. "Don't go anywhere, kid. The Calvary will be back later. And put out that light."

I let the flame die and darkness enveloped us.

"A word of advice," Gabriel whispered in the darkness, "if you-if you ever sink your teeth into him, don't let go until you feel the life leave his body. His kind comes back when you least expect it."

I listened to him move away in the darkness and brought my legs to my chest. I wrapped my arms around my knees and closed my eyes to the darkness.

I waited.

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RESCUE

IF ALL OF THE STRENGTH
ALL OF THE COURAGE
COME AND LIFT ME FROM THIS PLACE
FALL OF GRACE - SARAH MCLACHLAN

What seemed like an hour later, I heard movement in the tunnel and watched a light grow brighter. I rose to my feet, but was disappointed to see the ugly Nosferatu who had taken me to Wyatt enter the cave. It walked around the room to replenish and light all of the torches. When they were all lit, it walked over to the cage and smiled horribly at me.

"Wyatt's coming," it told me. "He wanted me to ask you if you were hungry."

I backed away from the hate I saw in the things milky eyes. I was indeed hungry, and I was sure that Wyatt knew it.

The creature cackled in amusement and walked over to the throne that sat only feet from the cage. It looked at the bodies hanging from the ceiling and smiled. Then it began to sing.

I put my hands over my ears, but the creature's horrible voice penetrated my eardrums. I fell to my knees and couldn't prevent the tears that poured from my eyes.

After a while it stopped singing and started talking to the bodies as if they were alive. The Nosferatu called them by name and walked among them as if they were its friends.

I sat in the cell and desperately tried to contact Micky, but something seemed to be blocking my efforts. I struggled to pray, but I couldn't help thinking that this was my punishment for killing my friends.

After watching and listening to the Nosferatu hold court with the bodies, we both heard something from the tunnel. Instantly it was alert and walked slowly toward the entrance.

I couldn't bring myself to hope that help was on its way. I was terrified that Wyatt was coming and that he would hurt me again.

Then I saw Micky come into the cave and cried out in warning, but it was too late. The Nosferatu jumped on Micky's back and spun him around. Before I could blink, a young girl darted forward and plunged a stake into the Nosferatu's back. It fell to the floor, immobile.

Micky looked down at the body for a moment, then around the cave. He saw me almost immediately and ran across the room, followed closely by Bruce. They reached the cage at the same time and Bruce reached out and grabbed the cell door. With a grinding wrench, he pulled it from its hinges and threw it away from the cage.

Before I could rise, Micky knelt before me and pulled me into his arms. Trembling, I threw my arms around his neck and buried my face in his neck.

"Baby," he whispered as I began to cry, "everything is alright now. Everything's fine. We got him."

He held me for a long time until I was able to calm down. Finally he helped me to my feet and led me from the cage.

"Are you alright, milady?" Bruce asked me gently.

I nodded slowly and pushed the hair from my face. "I'm hungry."

Bruce looked at Micky, who nodded toward a pile of clothing on the floor. Bruce walked over to it and picked it up roughly, then brought it over and dropped it at my feet. Abruptly I realized that inside the clothing was Wyatt, and that he had a stake through his chest.

I looked questioningly up at Micky.

"It's a gift," he told me with a smile. "I know what he did to you last night, I thought you might want some of your own blood back."

I smiled wryly. "You sure know how to turn a girl's head," I told him.

Micky and Bruce stepped back as I knelt beside Wyatt. Again I noticed how much Wyatt resembled Bruce and wondered if there were some kind of family ties between them.

I looked down into Wyatt's immobile eyes and smiled. I bent and brought my lips to his ear.

"I told you, brother," I whispered. "You weren't strong enough to hold me. It looks like my 'puppy' has bested you."

I laughed softly. "Any last words? No? Okay, time for that feast you promised me."

I sank my teeth into the flesh of his neck and drank. I remembered Gabriel's advice and knew that Wyatt would never let Micky survive another battle between them. I closed my eyes and gulped his blood as fast as I could. I swayed with dizziness and drank more. At last, I felt a wrenching sensation somewhere near my soul. I pushed away from Wyatt's body and hid my face with my hair. I reached up and wiped at my mouth with the back of my hand.

Elation filled me such as I had never known. I felt very powerful, very potent. I shook my head to gain control over my emotions, and felt Micky's hand on my shoulder. I looked up at him and felt desire flood through me.

He smiled, and eagerness leapt into his gaze.

I drew his head down to mine and kissed him with all the passion I felt. He pulled me against his body roughly and I moaned deep in my throat. Our tongues mated wildly and everything else faded from our reality.

A cleared throat brought it all crashing back.

I pulled away from Micky's arms and looked at him in amazement. He grinned boyishly at me, then pulled me to my feet.

We joined Bruce and walked to the cave entrance where a group of people stood. Some were humans but most were Kindred.

Brenda introduced me to the girl who had staked the Nosferatu. Her name was Charisma, and apparently she was the most experienced hunter in Nashville. I shook my head at that; she didn't look more than sixteen.

I wasn't surprised to see Gabriel standing near the girl. At one point, she reached for his hand and I wondered if he had ghoulé her as Micky had done to me.

Brenda also introduced me to her sire's other child, a pretty brunette named Christina, and her friends Luke and Lena. Luke was also Kindred, and Christina stayed pretty close to his side and seemed very sad.

Then Micky took me over to two men who were looking at the bodies hanging from the ceiling. He punched one in the arm and shook the other one's hand. I smiled as I recognized them as Nez and Tor from the Jesters.

Nez looked very much like he had when they had still been a group, but Tor was about ten years older. They greeted me like family and teased Micky about apron strings. He simply laughed and told them to find their own women.

We followed the others to the surface and I watched Gabriel and his friends disappear into the trees. Luke and Christina walked down to the water's edge while the rest of us went over to several cars parked near a large rock.

Brenda's cell phone rang just as Christina and Luke rejoined us.

"Faith." Brenda said into the receiver once she'd identified the speaker.

Brenda shot Christina a puzzled look. "Yes, she's here with me. A package? Of course, we'll come right now." She hung up her phone and turned to Christina.

"Who knows you're in town?" she asked her.

Christina glanced at Luke and shrugged. "Faith and whoever was here tonight. The people following us, I'm sure. Why?"

"You have a package waiting for you at the Chantry," she said.

Christina frowned. "A package?"

"Yes," she replied, "apparently a very large gentleman on a very large motorcycle and wearing a leather jacket dropped it off for you this evening."

Lena stepped forward, hope lighting up her face. "Graves?"

Brenda shrugged. "Faith didn't give me a name."

Bruce hung up the phone he'd been talking on and turned to Micky. "Elvira requests that we return to Salem tonight," he said with some humor in his voice. "She wants to talk to you about the security of the downstairs cells."

Micky groaned.

"Didn't she let you out?" I asked him. He shot me a sideways glance and I knew he'd found some way out of the cell on his own. I laughed.

"Micky," Brenda said, "why don't you take the plane and head back home. Bruce can go with you. I'll come as soon as this business with Christina is finished."

"Are you sure you don't need our help?" he asked.

"Elvira wants you back tonight," Bruce reminded him.

"Of course," he replied neutrally.

Bruce walked with Micky and me to a blue Sonoma parked nearby. We stopped briefly at The Western Hermitage Hotel to pick up my things, then drove straight to the airport and Elvira's waiting jet.

After takeoff, Micky and I excused ourselves to go into the rear cabin of the airplane. I sat on the edge of the bed, then laid back with my hand over my eyes. I felt the bed sag and looked up at Micky who had sat down beside me.

"You shouldn't have locked me in the cell, Sarah," He told me. "You could have been killed."

"I didn't think you would let me come to Nashville alone," I replied softly.

"I wouldn't have," he stated. "You should have stayed in Salem while I came to take care of your brother."

I shook my head and took his hand. "You couldn't have gotten anywhere near Wyatt. I was the only one who stood any chance of coming out of the whole thing alive. He would have killed anyone else, and you probably would have ended up another decoration in his cave." I shuddered at the memory.

"If I hadn't come alone, he never would have taken me to the cave and I wouldn't have found out what happened to my parents. They would have hung there forever, starving and heartbroken over what they had become."

"Your parents were in the cave?" Micky asked, surprised.

"My brother did kill them," I told Micky sadly. "He embraced them and then hung them down there to starve. I told him that they didn't deserve the embrace. I let him think I meant they weren't worthy to be Kindred, and he killed them. I think they were happy knowing it was all over."

I felt tears fall down my temples and into my hairline.

Micky gathered me into his arms and held me to his chest while I cried softly for my parents, for the missed years and the horror they had gone through.

"I'm so sorry, Sarah," he whispered into my hair. "I know things haven't been easy for you since we met. I could understand it if you decided you wanted to leave Salem."

Startled, I looked up at him and saw his love for me intermingled with uncertainty. Was it possible that he was unsure of my love for him now that the blood bond was broken?

I reached up and cupped his cheek. "Micky, it doesn't matter where I go, I have everything I ever wanted."

He nodded slowly. "I understand."

"I don't think you do," I replied. "I always wanted someone to love me for who I am, to care for me and protect me, even when I don't think I need protecting. I wanted someone I could love for who he was, someone I could care for and protect, even when he didn't think he needed protecting. I wanted friends I could trust and a family I could love."

"I can't give you a family, Sarah," he interrupted. "You know that."

"But you have," I told him. "I have a mother in Elvira and a father in Ford and more brothers and sisters than I could ever have imagined in the House and Clan Tremere."

"You have given me everything I ever wanted. As long as I am with you, I'll be happy, no matter where we go."

His smile lit up my night. "I love you, Sarah."

"I know," I whispered, "as much as I love you."

We kissed, and I knew heaven in his arms.

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