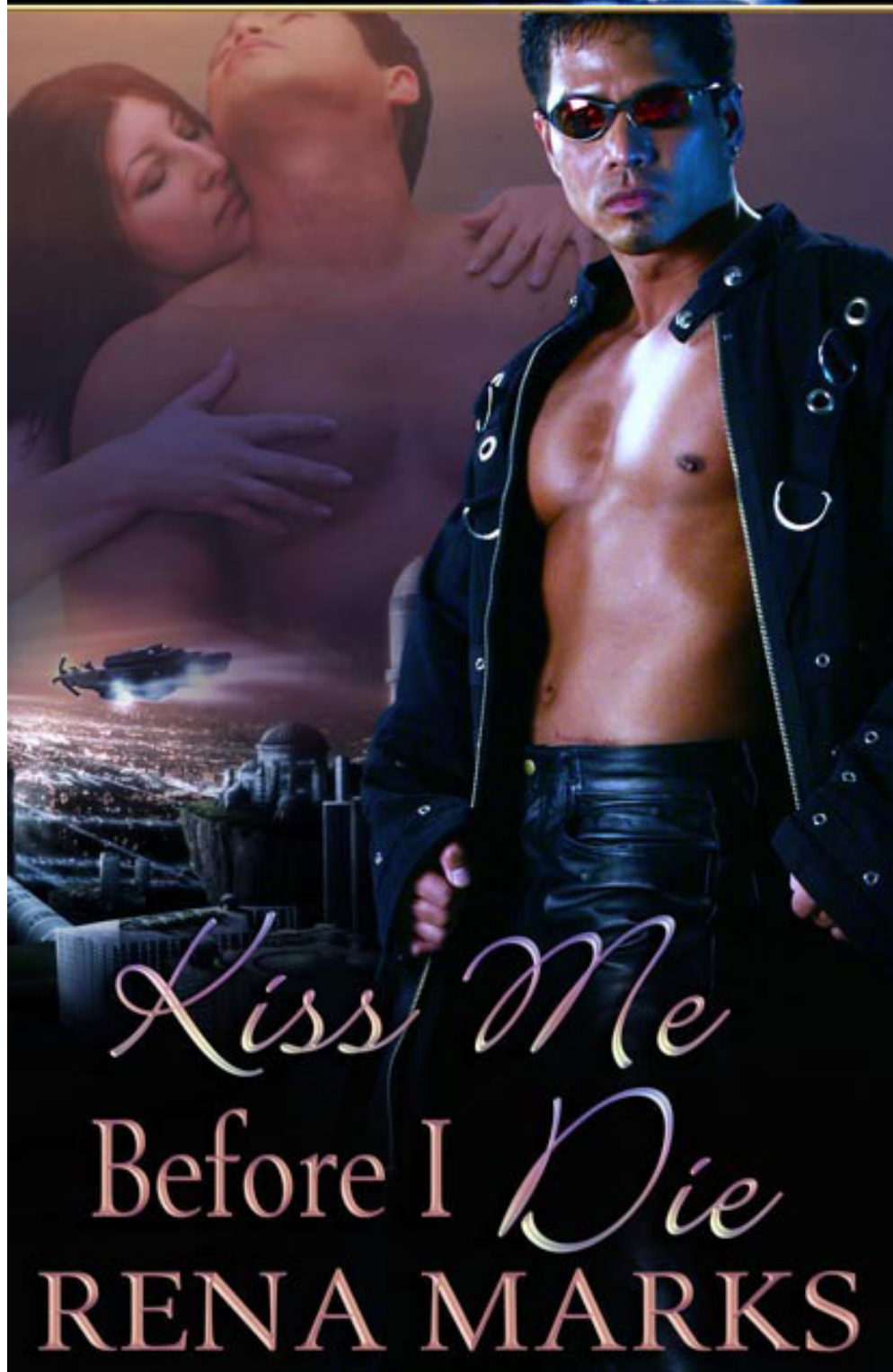


ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



*Kiss Me*  
Before I *Die*  
RENA MARKS

## **Kiss Me Before I Die**

*Rena Marks*

When an experiment goes wrong, Afton is sent to release the rage built up in her system by a desire-enhancing drug. Once she finds Ethan, head of the vampires, the drug kicks in. Suddenly, instead of wanting to kick his ass, Afton wants to kiss it.

A love affair between a vampire and an Extinguisher is doomed from the beginning, but Afton can't resist the lure of the predator. Ethan's blood calls to her quicker than she can run. What a frustrating predicament, to be trained to extinguish vampires when all she wants to do is bed him.

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



[www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com)

Kiss Me Before I Die

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# ***KISS ME BEFORE I DIE***

**Rena Marks**

### *Dedication*

This book is dedicated to the fantastic Devin Michael Yala, whose image not only finished the book, but gave me ideas for many more in the future.

My deepest gratitude to Ellora's Cave Romantica Publishing, the wonderful company who made it possible for an author to be on the cover of her own book.

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## Chapter One

*Vampires are not mythological evil creatures. We are the product of evolution. A changing world with less food and global warming.*

*Not the enemy to slay.*

*We are the enemy you have no choice but to become...for the rest of the world dies.*

The writing on the bathroom stall sent a shiver down my spine. Not just any club. Another posh nightclub.

This time in a new city. There was no one to know where I was and no one to know what I had left. Yet it followed me. Who would ever expect the musings of a vampire in the stall of the ladies' room?

I was showing a lot of leg tonight while dressed in my usual garb of skintight black. I had been fighting the urge to return to the nightlife but it was all I knew. However, I should be safe. As I said, it was a new city.

A new life. In which I'd left my traitorous lover behind.

Yet I couldn't get far. I'd already danced for a bit and felt hot and uptight when I slipped off to a darkened corner for a reprieve. Alone time, a chance to study the dancing bodies writhing around me. A chance to think about the writing on the bathroom stall and decide whether or not it was safe to stay.

I should have been startled at the rush of cool air behind me. At the very least, surprised, for it had been a year. Somehow I wasn't. Time melted away, as though it had just been yesterday.

A whisper of sweet breath curled near my ear. "You cannot get away from me, *bella*. You'll always be mine."

"I own myself," I whispered back. "I've refused you already."

"It's not that easy. For even now, you can't deny me."

His finger trailed down my shoulder, along my bare skin, danced down my arm. Lightly skimming, reminding me of the touch I craved. I breathed deeply as the blaze kindled deep inside.

He was right. Denial was impossible, avoidance was easier. Was it his power or was it something indescribable between us? For now it didn't matter.

Heat licked against sensitive nerve endings. His palm, open and warm, pressed flat to my abdomen, pulled me back into him. I could feel the fire between us, coiled tightly inside and knew I'd soon beg for his hand to inch its way lower.

His voice, deeper than ever, taunted me with known pleasure. "I could make you come here and now. No one would ever know."

Temptation was sinful and it was what I fought hard against. The lure of the vampire. My best weapons were fight and flight.

He was right but I wouldn't acknowledge it. For the burning edge of desire struck me tenfold. It was a drug, an addiction I still fought.

Sometimes it was one I didn't want to fight.

I turned my face slightly, to look into his eyes. Deliberately, I pulled away.

His smile was sardonic but he let me go. I wouldn't be able to suppress the urge for long, the awaited anticipation would make my failure sweeter.

He knew this.

"You run, Afton. But you unknowingly head for my own jurisdictions. There's a reason. You *are* mine."

"No, I'm not," I said clearly. The bastard was way too cocky. And why shouldn't he be? Dark hair contrasted with lighter brown eyes against creamy skin. The distinction of his lighter eyes stood out even more when he wore carefree stubble darkening the line of his jaw. He was tall, broad-shouldered and exuded sex appeal like nobody's business.

But I belonged to no one and never would.

Instead, I sighed. "How did you find me, Ethan?"

"It doesn't matter," he whispered and wrapped strong arms around me. For the briefest moment, I leaned into his strength. Felt it envelop me like a cloud of comfort on a cold day.

The need struck even harder now. It was so easy to close my eyes and go with it. Stop fighting. Give up my independence, my humanity. Everything that made me...me.

I stepped away. "Stop it," I chided. "Keep your tricks to yourself."

"Tricks?" he murmured unconvincingly.

"I mean it."

He knew what I was talking about. He had been imposing his will upon me, mockery to make me believe I was willing to surrender. I would have fallen for it, if I had not given myself the conscious reminder of fight or flight.

"Play nice or I'll run again," I warned. But was his need as great as mine? I allowed him to step close to me, close enough that I smelled the aftershave wafting from his skin. He leaned his lips toward mine, silently begging, yet also daring me to take the chance. It was the tiniest opportunity and I couldn't resist, for it had been way too long.

I tilted my head back and parted my moistened lips. He touched.

And all hell broke loose.

Wants, needs, feelings. Emotions ran rampant throughout my soul, yearnings and cravings of a body that had been too long without. I gasped for sweetened air and his tongue touched mine. It stroked lovingly and yet demanded my full surrender. Only one person could be this loving and challenging all at once.

Ethan.

I felt his hunger, always carefully monitored but now ready to break uncontrollably through. It bubbled to the surface before it was tamped back down when he broke the kiss.

He strung heated kisses along my jaw before returning to my lips. I was too eager to kiss him back. I'd missed this desperately. My reservations were flung to the back burner.

The music blared and the bodies around us quickened, movements becoming jerky, like mindless zombies with limbs partially stuck in the frozen throes of rigor mortis. But only their brains were dead.

Lights flickered off and on.

Our tongues entwined, smoothly touching and dancing, sensuously sliding together, making promises that neither of us could keep.

Tables crashed, noises growing louder as chairs overturned.

Our lips meshed thoroughly, hands roaming each other's bodies. He gripped my hips, pulling me into him. A shiver of need shot through me.

Yelling ensued all around us, angrily raised voices screaming with frustrated rage.

We broke apart, breathing heavily. Hearts racing. He lowered his forehead to press against mine as he kissed the tip of my nose.

Chaos encircled us. Shattering glass, liquid spilling.

"You've upset the balance," he murmured. "Come with me."

"Never," I said gently.

Glass tinkled as a bottle crashed over a person's skull in the scuffle just a few feet away. The victim collapsed like a tree, leaving the scent of blood behind.

"Foolish," he murmured and was gone. As usual, he left me to clean up the mess we'd made.

Cleanup wasn't easy. Normally easygoing patrons of the club were stunned as to what might have happened to cause such unheard of behavior. An uproar they were involved in. How did one explain they felt the bloodlust of my lover?

The vampire who couldn't have me.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was dusk when I saw him again. The sun was no longer bright but had cast a brilliant reddish pink glow over the horizon. The grass was green and the weather still warm, sweet-smelling and clean with recent rain. I sat on a park bench, ironically waiting for the dark in the midst of all this beauty from nature.

The air was still, frozen and locked in place. That alone triggered my senses.

And then he was there, standing before me. He'd materialized as a darkened shadow to block the faint pink glow of the sun.



My heart jumped. I'd missed him this past year, though I'd never let him know. For all in all, he was still an evil bastard that who cared nothing for humanity. And human, I was.

"I left you for a reason," I drolly reminded him.

There was smug satisfaction in his voice. "But you missed me. As much as I missed you. Last night proved it."

"Thank you for leaving me the mess," I said.

"You did not need to stay with the humans. Your place is beside me."

"*You* decided my place was there. I decide otherwise, Ethan. I make my own choices."

Suddenly he was down on his knees before me, pushing my legs apart to kneel between them. An intimate act, one I viewed as a sign of possession. In spite of that, it made my adrenaline race and my thighs quiver.

"You take way too many liberties," I snapped.

He clasped my waist and pulled me to him. I tightened my legs around him but while the movement served to keep the core of my body from touching him intimately, it also caused me to grip him with my thighs forcefully, as if I'd never let him go.

A small movement that pleased him.

"Why can't you just let me be?" I sighed.

His smile was cunning. "You can't be. Not without me."

I had been going about this the wrong way. I couldn't run from the man, he'd proven that much. It was time to turn the tables.

I relaxed my legs, allowing him closer access. His eyes gleamed with the intimacy and he dropped them to my parted lips when I wet them with the tip of my tongue. "You're right. I did miss you, Ethan," I said softly. I ran a fingertip over his jaw, over his smooth lips. I barely touched the bottom lip with the pad of my finger.

His nostrils flared ever so slightly.

"I hunger," I whispered. "For you." I slid my finger into his mouth and he sucked it, pulling yearnings from deep within me. Leaning forward, I tasted his lips again. I could feel my heart pulsating as the blood pounded in my veins. His touch was exquisite and tender, loving even on days when I didn't want the love.

For some days a girl just wanted wild, wanton sex. Sex without commitments, sex to walk away from.

Without pain.

I would have had Ethan that day, that summer. A year of running meant nothing, it melted. Faded away, along with the August sunlight. What stopped me was the sudden interruption by an Extinguisher.

Ethan sensed him as soon as I did. Whether it was the look on my face or a sharpening of his senses, I'll never know. He was whirling around even as I dematerialized.

When I reappeared behind the Extinguisher, the armored man exploded to nothing, replaced by blasting dust. Leaving me standing behind him with a nine-inch silver blade that had been plunged into the center of his heart.

It was too late for Ethan to stop his charge at the Extinguisher. It wasn't too late for him to stop the deadly strike of his fist to my own heart.

We tumbled onto the green grass behind us, him landing directly on top of me with a whoosh. Pressed groin to groin and staring into each other's eyes.

It wasn't the first time I'd saved Ethan's life. It was the first time he'd nearly staked me.

"I almost got you," he muttered, his face paper white.

"But you didn't."

"It was close."

I smoothed the worried crease in his forehead with the light touch of a finger. "You never used to charge Extinguishers. It's risky. You should have run," I chided.

"I don't need to run," he said arrogantly. "I was trained by the best."

That had been me. I was the Queen of the Extinguishers one year previous.

I had been the best of the best when I met the vampire of my dreams. The one I was created to exterminate. Ethan was my biggest challenge. The strongest vampire I'd ever been up against.

Extinguishers are humans deliberately infected with the vampire virus. Children from all social levels were regularly screened for exceptional athletic abilities, speed and strength. Bravery.

Females are especially rare for Extinguishers, since the female body is not prone to muscle mass. Not like a man's.

Humans thought it appalling that children were fed the blood of a captured vampire in order to improve their performance. But they looked the other way for the greater good of destroying the growing race of evil creatures. After all, someone had to police the stronger, more beautiful race of peoples. It was beginning to look like plain old vanilla humans were low man on the food chain and that inspired fear. Like all prejudices, after the fear followed hatred.

In any case, I, along with all cadets of that year, were taken from our homes to be fostered in a government training camp and *stricken*, the term for infection. Not all children survived the virus infestation. Just as not all children lived to even fight their first vampire. Some succumbed to accidents within the training camp, pushed too far for our human endurance.

Too often, it was forgotten that we were human.

The lucky ones lived. Survived. Fought. I was the best—one of the Originals. I'd served my time and now I was free.

Extinguishers are promised their freedom after they reached the age of twenty-five. Problem is, none of them ever lived to see the quarter of a century mark. Except for me.

That's right. I am twenty-six years old. But through experience, add a hundred years to that.

"Get off me," I hissed. "Or next time I'll let them stake you."

He made no move to shift except for the tiniest movement of a well formed brow. "Stake me? I am the best of the vampires. And I have battled the best of the Extinguishers. Where are we now, *bella*?"

I knew the point he made. Yes, I was under him, stretched out the way a woman should lie beneath a man. And my hackles rose when I realized it. But not for long. My leg reached out, easily flipping the dead weight on his back as I rose, straddling him instead.

My face was in his when I countered with, "I said get off."

He smiled. I was a fool as I realized this was his primary purpose all along. Me, straddling him, as though I intended to ride him through the night.

And dammit, the adrenaline from the danger of the Extinguisher still ran rampant through my veins. My body strummed with the anticipation of a release through sex.

He reached out with a fingertip to stroke my exposed throat, trailing down to the bared skin between my breasts and moving farther to where my shortened top exposed the unnaturally tight abs from a lifetime of hard work. The skin where he touched tingled, catching my breath. My nipples hardened and I arched my back, wanting nothing more than to expose them to the crisp air.

He skimmed the top of my waistband and his smile died as he stared at my lips, which felt like they'd suddenly swelled.

His voice was a whisper. "This is my favorite position."

For once I was honest. I looked deeply into his beautiful eyes, the light brown framed with thick, dark lashes. "Mine too," I admitted and lifted myself gracefully from his firmly muscled body. Still, I fought the allure of the predator. I may not be able to kill him yet...but give me time.

"And it should be yours," I said sweetly. "After all, that's how you once lay. Six feet under."

As I was an original Extinguisher, Ethan was an original vampire. He was older than dirt and had originated from the dead. Dug his way from his coffin, like the old vampire fairytales. It was unheard of nowadays, of course. Now they just infected each other. A virus.

"You would leave me unsatisfied, *bella*?"

"Go find another human to toy with, Ethan. If I run into you again, I'll be forced to leave."

Before he could respond, I vanished. Morphed into the night to wreak havoc and soothe my frustrated emotions. It was time to leave again. I'd made it an entire year without him and I wasn't sure if I wanted to go back to where I was the previous year. But until then, it was off to another nightclub.

This time, I traveled with paranoia. Ethan's words kept popping into my head, "*You unknowingly head for my own jurisdictions. There's a reason. You are mine.*"

What other choice did I have? I could just cross my fingers and hope I managed to miss one of his. Luck wasn't on my side.

He was there. I sighed when he snuck up on me for the third time. He reached for a lock of my hair, twirling it between his thumb and forefinger. It was long enough to bring to his nose to inhale the fragrance of my shampoo.

"You smell exactly the same, *bella*," he murmured.

"I am exactly the same."

I turned around. He had on a short-sleeved shirt that exposed muscular arms. His left arm was covered in tattoos, the same tattoos I knew well. A few new ones adorned his right, though it wasn't yet a sleeve.

There was something different about him. I'd have to study to figure out what it was. But I refused to give him the satisfaction of me staring, lusting after his body.

And lust I did, it was as uncontrollable as breathing. I resented my own lack of control more than I resented his knowledge of my desires.

Yet how could I not? His chest was amazing, broad and tapered to a narrow waist. I loved when he pulled me up against him, my softness against his hardness. My heart beat faster at the remembrance of how I wanted to trace each cut of muscle with my tongue, softening the harsh lines and tasting the warmth of his skin.

Somehow I craved him, like a vampire craved human blood. Yet it was opposite in my case, for he was the vampire, not I.

The air around us grew warm. Realization dawned, almost instinctual. Neither of us had to voice a warning at the intrusion. Our gaze connected briefly before we simultaneously ducked in perfect synchronization.

Extinguishers materialized not ten feet away. They couldn't attack, not with human patrons in the club. But we couldn't risk it. As they made their way toward us, Ethan and I elbowed our way out the back.

We burst through the door to face the entrapment of an alleyway. A heavy metal dumpster of open trash was about ten feet away. We made our way to it, intending to use it as a shield.

Time stood still as we waited.

This was an odd skirmish. The first two burst through the door, only to be taken out with well-aimed knives to the chest. It was standard, taught procedure from an Extinguisher training course.

Naturally, the rest of them knew those two would be taken out. They willingly sacrificed two of their own for the chance to get at us. Extinguishers were rare. That they were willing to lose two showed their desperation. Could it be they'd banded together to take Ethan out? He'd be considered quite a prize catch. I'd always worked alone and never managed the takedown.

Of course, there was the tiny bit in me I'd never acknowledged that wasn't sure she wanted to destroy him.

Maybe they wanted the status of being the best now that I was retired. It just so happened I was with Ethan both times they attacked him and forced me to pick sides. Defend or die. I was a little surly over my forced choice.

A foolish man morphed behind me. I broke his neck before he fully materialized and the rest looked surprised. Apparently that was a skill of only the Originals, the speed beyond that of a modern Extinguisher. Or maybe it was the premonition of where one would appear during a morph. In either case, I'd have to keep their surprise in mind. They retreated to various spots but continued full frontal with the attack.

Which was another shocking tactic, for we had been taught to retreat at losing. When it came down to it, vampires always had the upper hand on strength. Our skills were speed, cunning and agility. The element of surprise. Yet, these Extinguishers weren't retreating. They were losing and would have no one left to morph out of here at this rate.

"Why the hell do they continue to attack?" I whispered harshly.

"You're still fighting, are you not?" Ethan asked dryly.

"They're forcing me to kill."

"Not the first time you've killed," he reasoned.

"I don't normally go after humans," I scorned.

His voice grew cold. "I never understood the reasoning. You have a license to *extinguish* my race with silver to the heart, but take that same blade to one of your colleagues and it's considered *killing*."

It was the same old argument he and I always had. The one I had no answer for.

The assassins were either better trained in the last year, or I had grown soft. A blade missed my heart but plunged into my shoulder as I shifted a split second too late.

The Extinguisher had materialized right beside me, way too quick for me to sense him. An unheard-of event, for I always sensed them first. It was what made me the best.

Ethan roared and charged but the Extinguisher vanished before Ethan reached him. Instead, my lover grabbed me and morphed us both out of there even as the light dimmed from my eyes.

## Chapter Two

It was a cave I awoke in. A darkened cave, good for improved night vision for those more than plain human. Hushed whispers all around me. Not a lot of body heat.

A vampire nest.

"It's awake," said a childlike voice. A tiny, fanged creature no more than six or seven, pointed at me. His father grabbed him, moving him from my reach. As if I'd harm an innocent.

I did a double take. An innocent? Surely blood loss was to blame for my brain failure.

"What are you?" the blond boy asked. "You smell like us. But you look human."

The cave was so silent you could hear a pin drop. Until the voice of Ethan rang strong. "She's an Extinguisher."

There was hissing from the shadowed corners. "You brought one here? You should have let her die."

"You will not harm her," Ethan said.

"How dare you bring an Extinguisher into our midst?"

"You forget who rules?" Ethan's voice was deadly. Silence was his answer.

"I'm an ex-Extinguisher," I said soothingly. To justify Ethan's actions. For if I were one of the vampires, I'd take me out in a heartbeat.

"She's a female. Is she the one?" I heard from the corner.

The same child inched toward me. His father reached to pull him away but Ethan interrupted. "Let him. Trust must begin. Jordan, go on."

The boy tentatively moved forward. "You don't have fangs," he said.

"You do."

He looked at me like I was an idiot. "How else would I eat? Hey," he continued as it dawned on him. "What do you eat?"

"Food."

"Like a human?" he asked, eyes wide.

I simply nodded.

"But you can morph, like we do. Right?"

To this child, this...Jordan, I was a scary urban legend. A nightmare parents whispered about in the dark.

"Yes," I said.

"Where's your mommy and daddy?" he asked suddenly.

I shifted uncomfortably. "I don't know anymore."

"Why not?"

Ethan answered. "Because Extinguishers are taken from their parents before they are even eight years of age."

The looks on the faces of the evil creatures around me were incredulous. As if we, the humans, were the monsters.

"We are trained daily in order to have the strength to extinguish," I justified.

"I thought you gained strength by drinking the blood of a captured vampire. One of us," someone said, bitterness brewing in his voice.

I had no answer. I certainly didn't ask for the benefit back then.

"At what age were you stricken, Afton?" Ethan asked quietly. He was smart. Had he demanded an answer, I would have clammed.

"Three."

Silence reigned in the aftermath yet again.

"Why so young? If they are normally taken at eight?" another of the voices asked.

"I was one of the Originals."

"Originals?"

"The first crew."

"An experiment," Ethan countered. "You were an experiment."

"One that worked well," I reminded him curtly.

"Yet one that has not been able to be recreated. They don't know what happened differently with you."

"Apparently they figured it out. I'm lying here wounded, aren't I?"

"They knew exactly how to wound you. Don't you find it curious?"

"Oh, do share with me, Ethan. I'm too tired for games."

"They have your blood. They must have infected the assassin with it, instead of blood from a vampire. You are not used to sensing your own blood morphing in and out. Vampires are—shared blood runs rampant throughout our lines. This has been planned for years, Afton. The Extinguisher in the park? He wasn't sent for me. He was there for you."

A shiver ran down my spine, icy cold and making my fingers and toes tingle. Here I thought I had been saving Ethan. Here I thought they'd let me retire.

Instead, I was being hunted like an animal.

I guess it was beneficial that I'd spent the last year underground hiding from my lover. It kept the government from finding me also.

I should have known. There was never any intention of allowing my departure. Not after all the years of training. The inhumane conditions. But I'd earned retirement, dammit.

I was one of the lucky few who stayed alive.

"And how are we to feed her?" asked a female. "We have no human food."

"We should turn her loose."

Ethan tore his gaze from mine long enough to glare in the general vicinity of the voice.

Dead silence once again reigned in the cave. The tension thickened, the beginnings of a catastrophic tantrum from Ethan. Minds around us would go insane with rage, or at least they should. I wondered if his fits worked on vampires the same way they did on humans?

"Ethan," I whispered gently.

At first, he didn't hear.

"Ethan," I said again, careful to keep any urgency from my voice. When he cut his attention to me, something softened in his eyes.

There was the key to averting a disaster. Ethan was all-out male, needing to be needed. Frustrated because his twisted mind thought I was his but I was a female born and bred not to need anything or anyone.

"You know I can take care of myself," I said softly, "but I am a little weakened right now. I don't know any of these people. Maybe just you and I can head out to find me something to eat?"

The air was thinning, becoming easier to breathe. Drier, as though the humidity was evaporating quickly.

"You shouldn't be up and about, *bella*," he chided gently.

I could almost see the relief that swept through the inhabitants of the cave. I lowered my eyes to his lips.

Sensual lips set in a masculine face, his pale jaw whiskered with darkness and his forehead lined with worry.

For me.

"You can help me," I reminded him grudgingly, the way I would have normally. But softer, still trying to pull him from his mood.

I'd never before asked Ethan for help. He wasn't too sure about it, I could tell. His eyes swept the cave as he sought out the females of the group.

I reached out to touch him. "You, Ethan. I don't trust them."

That clinched it. He pulled me to him, much more gently than he would have. "Bella, what will I do with you?"

I smiled and did what later I might regret but for now couldn't resist. I placed my lips to his for the lightest brush of a kiss, sealing our relationship and fate before all his people. "Feed me."

We had to forage for food. Vampires didn't eat, they nourished on live blood. Remarkably enough, they'd discovered they could feed from each other, not like the old



days where human blood was what they needed. Evolution had fixed them so they replenished much faster, days instead of the months it took humans to regenerate.

Still, they were considered a threat. They probably hadn't touched a human in years but were still hunted like criminals to be hanged.

Over time, they'd gotten to the point where their blood was replenished even faster by the introduction of another's. Of course, it wouldn't hurt a human to donate once in a while, to bring new nutrients into the blood line but there was always that fear of infection.

Never mind that we infected ourselves willingly by injecting vampiric blood. Why we thought the disease could be transmitted through their saliva into our throat was beyond me. There was so much more to the equation.

Death.

But the greatest gift a human could do for their vampire lover was to donate blood. As far as I knew, I was the only human ever to have a vampire lover.

I was not good at playing the damsel in distress and had to bite my tongue when Ethan bent to lift me gingerly enough to carry outside. I looked around and noticed the cloudy, darkened day. Very unlike the sunshine I'd expected. Gloomy and gray, like my sudden mood.

"It is killing you to depend on me, isn't it?"

Ahh, so he'd noticed.

"It was killing me to lie weakened in a cave surrounded by those lusting after my throat," I snapped.

The bastard chuckled. "One of us lusts for much more than your throat, my love."

"Stop calling me that." Because it caused the strangest of feelings deep in my belly.

He ignored my outburst and carried me to a stream. Surely he didn't think he'd bathe me?

"Just set me down," I instructed. "I'll be fine while you find me something to eat." One heavy brow lifted and Ethan walked into the water with me still in his arms.

I shrieked when the cold hit my bottom end first and stiffened my whole body, nearly bucking from his arms.

"Hold still, *bella*. You have the strength of an army but a little water gives you fits?"

"It's cold."

"I know. I am in it, also."

"Did you ever hear of heated baths, macho man?" I grumbled. "Even cavemen did it."

"You heal as quickly as one of us, Afton."

His voice was odd. I looked up at his handsome face to see his eyes fixed on my torn neckline, which plunged to my belly. It had been pulled from my injured shoulder, exposing the wound that was now scabbed over.

I didn't know if he was uncomfortable from my exposed cleavage or the wound. But my heightened healing abilities made most people wary of me.

Except for certain doctors. They had been ecstatic when I'd attained this ability later in life. As though I'd been a personal conquest. Probably they wanted to know how the ability could be duplicated for humans. A huge part of the reason why I'd retired, owing the government nothing for their "care" over the last couple of decades.

"You've seen my body before, Ethan."

"Yes but not for a very long time. I have only so much control." Apparently, if the tic in his jaw was anything to go by.

He slid me down the length of him to stand in the water. It was still cold, as evidenced by the pucker of my nipples within the thin cotton of the torn shirt. He grasped the edge of my shirt gently and lifted it up over my head.

I couldn't be modest or shy. Not with Ethan.

"A little late to undress me. I'm already soaked, as you are."

"Yes," he agreed, wringing the water from my top and tossing it onto one of the rocks. "But I'd like this to dry out enough for me to twine laces through it so you're not showing my wares to all the vampires."

"Not yours," I reminded softly.

He merely smiled, eyes still on my breasts. "You are beautiful."

He lifted the edge of his own shirt, whipping it over his head to use as a washrag, carefully cleaning around the wound healing on my shoulder. "What would people think, *bella*? An Extinguisher, naked in a stream with a vampire?"

"They would know nothing could possibly happen with the ice cubes floating in the river."

Mock concern lit his face. "You are cold, my love?" He pulled me close, pressing my stiff nipples into his chest.

But, ah, irony. Feeling the rock hard pebbles poking into him was a double-edged sword for us both.

"Afton," he muttered, his voice thick with need. His lips lowered to mine slowly. I ached for his touch.

The world spun out of control with Ethan's kisses. I might have resisted had he not reached out and lightly pinched my numb nipples with his thumbs and forefingers.

The pleasure-pain made me want to climb atop him, to lose myself and thrust my core against him, wanting and seeking parts to fit into me like the perfect interlocking puzzle piece.

I knew I'd be angry for allowing my needs to rule me but it was only with this one vampire that I ever lost control. My blood pressure rose with my deeper breathing and my heart raced when his hands were upon me. It raced too fast for my recent stabbing.

I swooned in his arms and was barely aware when he lifted me again, taking me from the water to the smooth rocks still warmed from the sun burning behind the clouds. He covered my body with his, warming me while I chattered with cold...or shock.

"I am sorry, I should not have put you through this."

I smiled weakly. I wouldn't ever admit it was worth it.

This time he did leave me to seek food. I lay, like a bare-breasted mermaid on the rocks, waiting for his return. When he arrived, it was with human food.

Asparagus and strawberries. He'd used my torn shirt to gather as much as he could.

I felt stronger now. Enough to sit up and eat, my legs drawn to my chest. While I wasn't shy, after all you couldn't be when you'd lived in a medical facility all your life, it was uncomfortable being the only unclothed one. Ethan sat and patiently strung the torn halves of my top together with some sort of twine he'd found.

He handed it to me when he'd finished and I drew it over my head. He pretended not to notice my breasts as I stretched tauntingly.

The lacing brought the two halves together enough to cover my bosom. "You've turned me into a fashion statement," I mocked.

"A completely modest one," he agreed.

My teeth refused to stop chattering. I knew what was coming, it always worked this way. It was how my body fixed itself.

Once again, Ethan carried me. I was sick, and at this moment, it felt good to be cuddled in his strong arms.

He was worried. His jaw was tight and I knew my behavior was unusual. Especially when I pressed light kisses to his roughened jawline.

"Ethan?" I whispered into his ear.

"Bella?"

"I don't want you to be afraid when something happens to me."

I could almost feel his breathing catch.

"What do you mean, Afton?" His voice was harsh.

"I don't want you to blame yourself, because this is something that always happens. It's how my body heals itself when there's been a lot of damage."

"Your injury has worsened?"

"I think it was infected. Perhaps poisoned. In any case, I'm about to go into a coma."

"What? For how long?"

"As long as it takes to heal. I just don't want you to blame yourself."

"I should not have taken you into that cold water."

I sighed. "See what I mean? With or without, I would sicken. It's nothing you did, it's simply how I heal."

"What do I do in the meantime?"

"There's nothing you can do. I've eaten, now I'll just rest. But," I warned, "I may thrash. Nightmares. From what I remember." He knew what I meant. Videotapes of my hospital stays. I'd never slept without being plugged into machines and monitored constantly.

From some clips I'd seen, I could get pretty violent while fevered.

"You might want to tie me."

## Chapter Three

The thing I hate most about dreaming is that when you do, you don't realize you're in the midst of it. You have to relive events as though you are really there. Or at least I do.

*I had to look up at the faces around me.*

That's what I remember about being three. You're little. Everyone else is big. Sometimes you feel like, if you could curl into a ball and close your eyes, no one will notice you.

No one will poke another long needle into you.

No one will yell at you, forcing you to eat the foul-tasting food. Take the medications. Pull on you, stretch you.

Endure grueling ballet-inspired exercises, rigorous gymnastics training.

It was scary to look up. It was more scary to not be able to wake up. Sometimes I couldn't wake up until the burning paddles were pressed to my chest. It was a pain like no other. I hated those white coats. All of them hurt me. One day that changed.

*He arrived.*

That one doctor was kind. The one doctor leans down, eye level with me. I craved human attention so badly by six. Back then I had no idea emotions were cut from us to turn us into guiltless, unfeeling assassins.

All I knew was I liked that doctor who bent low to speak to me as if I were human.

But he was a man not to be trusted.

"You are a special little girl, aren't you, Afton?"

I shrugged, unsure of how I was supposed to respond. Because a wrong answer meant punishment. If not for me, maybe for the other experiments locked away with me. And I had to protect the others. It was my duty. I was strongest. I was the first.

"I want you to try something for me, little girl."

Deep in my belly, I felt that weird feeling that spread through to my arms and legs before I shut down. Because only when I shut down could I keep from crying.

My toughest lesson was about to surface. Shutting down required more strength that day. It wasn't to keep me from crying, it was to keep me from losing my sanity.

"Come with me, Experiment A3."

That was my name. The first two infected children had died from the overdose of vampire virus. I was number three, still alive. I don't know what the letter stood for but I always remembered it linked me to my real name. Afton.

One Russian doctor had used my real name. Once. Of course, I was too young to realize he was simply trying to establish trust.

We walked for miles through tunnels lined with silver metal sheets. Now I realize it was silver to keep the vampires out. Back then I just knew it was to keep certain vampires in.

Finally we reached the center. The bowels of the camp.

Another laboratory. Bright fluorescent lights, sickly greens. A bed in the center, a frame around it like a coffin.

Chained in silver and kept in a preservative jelly...was a man.

"Not a man, A3. A monster. A human infected. It affects the brain and changes the body. Eventually, they become violent, killing innocent people to eat. Which is why we call them vampires. At the very end, their brains rot and they turn to zombies, eating diseased, foul flesh of dead human bodies rather than just blood."

The man on the table did look like a zombie. Malnourished to the point of a barely living skeleton. There were purple rings around his sunken eyes, making him look half crazed.

"Repeat after me, A3. This ees a monster."

I enunciated each syllable clearly. It was a game with me, to mimic the accents of each doctor at the camp. This one was Russian, like the majority of them, and I spoke in perfectly cultured English. The game, however, was for later when I was quarantined. That was when I would remember this moment and mimic his voice until I sounded like a Russian doctor too.

At that age, I had no idea the chained monster was my nutrition. My injections, which made me horribly sick when I received too many, like doses of poisonous chemotherapy. If I had known then, I might have resented the crazed creature.

But I didn't know.

"This is what you'll do, A3. You will terminate the monster. This knife is made of silver. I want you to plunge it into his heart, the way you've been shown."

Yes, at the age of six I'd already terminated. Not vampires yet but humans, small animals. Not that I knew it as death to humans, the government justified mercy assassinations. Prisoners on death row were given a choice over lethal injection, battle a six-year old Extinguisher in training and possibly win your freedom, like a modern day gladiator.

Not many humans understood after three years of being continually stricken, I already had the speed, strength and agility of an adult vampire. Forever. It was fully bound into my DNA. I was just too young to understand how to control it. A big reason why the others like me kept dying.

Lately, I'd heard what-if whisperings amongst the white coats. *What if she were bred?* I didn't know that word.

*Bred.*

"Your entire life is devoted to learning to extinguish monsters. This is your first live one, though he's a little weak. How I wish technology was that where we could store his blood but you've turned out to be quite a success. We are done with that phase of your testing. You are completely stricken."

I was a failure that day. At six, I was unable to extinguish the monster. The whispers were that perhaps I was unable to strike out at a helpless creature.

That worried them. The question was perhaps my emotional training hadn't been rigorous enough.

They kept him prisoner for years, until I turned thirteen. At thirteen I'd matured enough to hate Doctor Morozov.

With the way the creature had looked when I was six, he'd invoked the last vestiges of pity in my heart by the time I turned thirteen. By that age I had already exterminated countless vampires and had become quite the successful Extinguisher. Still, for some reason the doctors wanted me to extinguish the one responsible for molding me. The one who'd nourished me with his blood.

My surrogate mother.

Again we headed to the bowels of the underground camp. The deeper we traveled, the more chilled I became.

Although nothing had been said, I knew what was expected of me.

"This time, it is different, A3. He has not been drained of blood in years. And you have matured to see him for the monster that he is."

I had matured enough to see many for the monsters they were.

The vampire was healthier and a lot more vicious. He was caged now, instead of preserved in jelly on a flat bed with tubes draining his life away.

He was still pale and weakened but not helpless. An enormous cage lined the length of the laboratory. At some point, probably when the creature was sedated, a doctor had been locked in this cage performing tests on him. There was a small metal desk and stool, a couple of steel beds that jutted from the wall like platforms. For now they stood empty. Instead the doctor performed routine work on the computers safely outside the cage.

Doctor Morozov had grown arrogant during the years. He pushed me to the vampire after electronically opening the gate.

I tumbled headfirst toward the creature. He hissed at me and attacked. The hissing was his mistake, it cost him precious moments, while speed was my biggest strength.

Plus, he'd been locked away for years and had no idea what Extinguishers were capable of.

A quick jab of my forearm to his throat stopped his hissing and the element of shock was on my side.

But I was just toying with the monster. Testing him, wasting time. For Dr. Morozov was up to something and I was going to find out what.

I heard alarms being sounded. Morozov had dropped the quarantined gates around the heart of the camp. No guards could get in. Just as I couldn't get out of the cage. And we couldn't get out of the main lab room. Yet.

The vampire came at me clumsily, for all his brute strength, he had no fighting skills left after so many years of wasted muscle. I leapt onto a table and flipped a no-armed cartwheel over his head. His face registered surprise at the show of gymnastics.

Morozov didn't, of course. I'd been a trained gymnast for years.

But it served its purpose. I noticed where the cameras were in the room. There were three—someone never noticed they'd been placed in the caged area. Apparently the cage had been added after the cameras were installed. One was aimed at the outskirts of the lab, where the good doctor watched our gladiator scene from his safe distance.

The creature turned to me and I allowed him to throw me. I was much lighter and smaller than he was and like I hoped, he threw me upward. It was painful but it smashed the camera directly behind me.

One down, two more to go.

I wasn't about to take another direct hit so soon, though.

I canvassed the possibility of weapons in the room. The metal stool one of the medics used. I picked it up and smashed the creature's head with it, then carelessly tossed it behind me and shattered the second camera.

Here's the thing about being thirteen. Subtlety is not yet a fine point.

Morozov got suspicious. "What are you doing, A3?" he screamed. He ran to the control box, where I assumed he'd lift the gates for the guards.

I followed him and the vampire followed me along the length of the cage.

Morozov had never been faced with direct danger. He'd always had his experiments chained and drugged, after all. But we were locked inside. The doctor ran back to the gate to be sure. He tested the lock, running some numbers through the keypad on the cage.

I was underneath the last camera, standing in the blind spot, blocking its view of me.

I reached up and quickly bent it so it had a convenient image of the floor.

The vampire used a spurt of unnatural speed to get to the doctor through the bars of the cage. It was doubtful that with all the tests throughout the years, they never once thought to measure the length of his arms to see how far out he could reach.

The good doctor never noticed when I bent the camera, he was so panicked by the vampire in front of him. He made a startled move to back away but it was too late. The creature reached out and picked up the lab coat by the lapels, lifting him so his feet dangled above the ground.

I had a moment of panic. When the cameras were watched later, would the humans wonder where I was for those split seconds?



Would they be able to realize I wasn't present for the few moments it took to move the camera's view and let the creature get to the doctor?

Did I have to make a run for the monster?

Or...

My brain stopped as a new idea came across it.

My God. Morozov had closed the main gates because he wanted me dead. He'd thought the vampire would kill me, exonerating him because it was videotaped during what he would call another training session. He never expected us to break from the steel cage.

Which is what I would do.

He hadn't realized I'd just reached full strength. Lucky for me, for I hadn't quite realized it would materialize like a gift in the night either.

Rage filled me. After all I'd endured, had managed to survive, he was going to create my death just to learn from the experience? For what purpose?

Adrenaline surged through my limbs, making it hard to suck in enough oxygen for my racing heart.

"Kill him!" Morozov shouted to me, despite his awkward dangling position from the creature's outstretched hands.

"Afton, be still, my love." Somehow, Ethan's voice came from the vampire. *"Stop thrashing so, you'll hurt yourself."*

Was it Ethan? Or was it a vicious vampire? Was it a kill or be killed situation, or a trick?

"Stupid girl, kill the vamp! It is what you are trained to do."

## Chapter Four

My mind blended the facial features of Ethan and the vampire before me. Blurred them until they were so indistinguishable, I couldn't tell one from the other. And my limbs were heavy, slow to move, as though they trudged through thickened mud.

*"Shh, bella. Let me hold you through the night."*

I did want to be held. So very, very much. I hated being back at this place, the place I'd just as soon forget. The place forever imprinted in my mind.

There was only one who ever called me *"bella"*. And I had not been able to exterminate him.

I had pulled the monster from the doctor. The creature with the crushed larynx stumbled toward the back of the cage. He moved forward to the gate again, one solid kick square in the chest smashed him through the metal.

The hinges gave and the gate crashed with the echoing clang of metal against cold stone floor.

His squeal was horrific as he pulled himself from the burn of the silver, leaving crispy skin sizzling on the bars. It might have churned my stomach but I was in the zone.

The doctor turned ashen moments before his brain registered his danger. He was in a room with a crazed monster which had scared the hell out of him *through* the gate.

A room in which cameras had been crushed.

A room where alarms had been deliberately triggered and safety deadbolts had been integrated, sliding into place. Delaying security's rush to his rescue and locking the doctor in hell. His own stupidity.

The vampire grabbed at him, lifting him by the neck with one hand. I walked behind, far enough to keep my distance should he decide to drop the doctor and rush at me instead.

*"A3! Attack!"*

I almost laughed. He expected to command me while he was at the monster's mercy? After planning my death as nothing more than another experiment? I meant nothing to him.

Until he needed my help.

I watched as the vampire ripped out his throat. I knew that the doctor's blood pouring down the monster's throat would enable the healing process on the vamp's damaged body immediately, soothing the pain of his crushed larynx and metallic burns.

Still, I waited. Because there was still that little niggling problem of battling helpless creatures. Full strength was much more of a challenge.

When it turned on me, I was able to fight again.

But this time, it could talk.

"What the hell are you?" His voice was harsh, his throat still healing on the inside.

"I am an Extinguisher. I serve the human race." The prepared speech rolled out automatically, years of memorization paying off.

A surge of anger raged at the knowledge that it slipped from me so unconsciously.

"An Extinguisher? That harebrained scheme actually came to pass?"

We were slowly circling each other. I wouldn't forget he was trying to lull me so he could catch me off guard.

"Thirteen years ago."

"You're just a little girl."

"Not anymore."

"No," the vampire sneered, eyes on my fully developed breasts. "I see you mature faster. How did they merge our DNA with yours?"

I fought the urge to hunch my shoulders in an attempt to cover myself. Instead I snapped, "*You* were kept prisoner an awful long time."

The realization of why he was kept alive for so many years dawned on him. His eyes glowed with hate. "I was your donor? You little bitch—"

"Now, Mama," I chided and watched his lips thin.

"Get this straight before I kill you and every human in this camp. You're nothing but a man-made attempt at crossbreeding. Less than that, an experiment. The child of Frankenstein."

"Dr. Frankenstein" was close enough to the lab doctor who created me. The other Russian accent. Dr. Fokusovich. His head was extremely flat in back, with low-placed ears. He moved clumsily, some sort of birth defect.

"Perhaps I'll introduce you to the natural way of crossbreeding before I choke your pretty neck." The vampire massaged his crotch lazily, causing the area to bulge through the thin material of his scrubs.

It was enough to raise my temper to attack first, against all the training I'd been given. Yet that same training was strong enough for me to automatically go for the most recent injury.

His throat.

The arch of my foot connected. Surprise rolled across his face, followed by the sudden sting of pain.

Then he let loose. Ignoring the obvious hurt of my reopening his healing injury, he charged with deadly intent. I was a lot smaller than him and it was easy to reach for my neck.

I collapsed before he could touch. Dropping flat on my back to the ground, I raised my leg to connect with his crotch. In the brief seconds it took for more pain to register, I had flipped to my feet behind him.

He leaned onto a steel table before him, knuckles whitened as he gripped the edge. Veins protruded, twisting down his pale forearms like ugly blue worms.

This time when I kicked, it was at the point where his back lined up with the edge of the table. There was nowhere his bottom half could go, pressed the way he was against the edge. The force of my kick shifted his upper half, separating his spine with a snap.

He dropped, face-first, involuntary muscle spasms jerking his extremities. His bloody spine protruded from the wound caused by the sharp tear of jagged bone through the flesh.

Given enough time, he could heal. But for the extent of his injury, he didn't have that kind of time. His breathing was labored as he suffocated slowly, his nose pressed against the cold floor, paralyzed and unable to lift his head to breathe. I lifted it for him by a wad of hair clenched in my fist.

"Bitch," he gasped. "There's something you should know before I die."

While I didn't respond, warning bells sounded deep in the recesses of my mind.

"Your mom was the best lay I ever had. Enjoy my genes. You'll like your sex with a little pain."

Swirling clouds of black marred my vision. His words had to be untrue. I knew he was just trying to goad me into a quick and merciful death for him. I reached for the tiny cord of bone exposed from the wound on his waist. In slow motion, I watched as his head dropped back down to the floor.

Not many people knew that Experiment A3 wasn't one of the children screened and taken from happy parents.

Not many knew that I'd been borne to a single mother, who was easy enough to commit to a mental institution for the terrors locked within her mind, for her child to be taken and raised by the government. A3 had been set up to enter the experimental training camp.

Not many knew it was my goal to find out why.

The monster was dead when the harsh fluorescent lights flickered and went off. I was hardly in the pitch black for a second before the emergency yellow lights replaced them with the dull glow of amber.

Guards and white lab coats burst into the laboratory, guns drawn. My hand still held the monster's bloody spine. It resembled the skeleton of a fish.

The human males had been trained not to show emotion. Yet, several of them looked incredulous when they realized what the ripped, shattered bone was that I held in my grasp. Then, disgust washed across their faces, as if they hadn't taught me the horrific violence I used to survive.

"A3?" The voice was hesitant, instead of neutrally commanding as it had always been. "Please, come this way—"

"My God! Dr. Morozov...he's...dead," one of them exclaimed.

The keen of the emergency sirens stopped suddenly, leaving a thick silence behind like heavy cotton jammed into my ears. There was a faint ringing left in my head that mimicked the constant wail, like an echo. I fought the urge to shake my head clear.

Other than the ringing, there was complete silence in the lab. Along with the stench of blood.

"Someone get a hold of Dr. Fokusovich," another said.

Guns were still drawn. I knew they suspected I was responsible for the doctor's death. And I know they had never guessed I was capable of ripping out a vampire's spine.

"A3?"

"My name is Afton." My voice surprised me. It was so young, childlike. Somehow, somewhere, I'd forgotten the fact that I was thirteen.

The doctor who'd spoken to me looked confused. "I don't understand, A3."

"I am no longer a letter and a number. My name is Afton."

Once again, I watched emotion flash over their normally impassive faces. I could visualize the wheels in their brains turning, pondering the question, who would be the first to search my records to find what my original name had been.

"You are calmer, bella. *Relax, my love.*"

"All right, Afton." The doctor said slowly. "Please. Come with me." At last, the very beginnings of respect.

I was calmer. The fight was done for now.

## Chapter Five

I awoke curled onto Ethan's chest, my body directly on top of his. "Your fever's broken," he commented.

"Must have, if I woke up," I agreed.

I dropped my head back onto his chest and closed my eyes for some much deserved rest after the hell I had just relived.

When I woke next, Ethan and I were alone. I was still balanced on his chest, my arm wrapped around his waist. "Where are the rest of your vamps?" I asked, wondering if any others may have seen me in the throes of my fever.

"*Bella*," he chided. "Surely you don't think we nest together constantly? Like insects? Sometimes we require privacy. You and I are no longer in the main cave but in a dugout extension."

I tightened my arm around him. I was grateful for the privacy – after all, I'd been a loner all my life. Getting used to swarms of people was extremely difficult for me.

"I'll bet there's one thing you don't know about yourself," he said.

"Tell me?" My voice was curious. Being a successful experiment was based on the fact that I studied every aspect of myself, every detail, while remaining as detached as if I studied a bug under a microscope.

"If you are spoken to while dreaming, you respond. You will answer any question I ask without reservations. Do you remember?"

"No," I said, trying to recollect what I'd told. "There was one time when I heard your voice but I don't remember an actual conversation with you." Suddenly the situation struck me as humorous. "How ironic! To be injected with truth serums which my body rejected. To be constantly interrogated and studied to see if I told all, when all they had to do was talk to me while I slept." I laughed.

Ethan's hands rubbed up and down my back. I was very aware of how nestled I was in his warmth. How safe I felt. For even I couldn't exterminate Ethan. Nobody could get to me through the ancient vampire.

Not that I had anything to fear. I took care of myself, always.

"I was surprised the first time I saw you, *bella*," he murmured.

"Why?" I said lazily, enjoying the spicy scent that was pure Ethan. My cheek was pressed against his chest, one of his fingers twirled a lock of my hair.

"We'd heard so much about the Original Extinguisher. And the rest of the Extinguishers that we had already fought were tough enough, we wondered what you could be like."

I thought back to the day I'd first met Ethan. He wasn't what I'd expected either. He was a mass of contradictions. More tough, human guy than evil vampire creature.

Deadly attractive.

Arrogant as hell.

And he warmed my frozen libido like no other.

"I'd never seen such a tiny thing take on so many vamps and still fight without flinching."

"Your group was toying with me."

"Yet you scared the hell out of us over how much you could take. And you still got away. It was astounding, a human girl breaking from an entire clan of vampires."

"I was sixteen," I scoffed. "No longer a girl."

"But not yet a woman," he countered softly.

It was true. I had been a virgin. Technically. I'd never been with a man but my body was not a stranger to being probed. For over time, I'd found out what *bred* meant.

"I can tell when you think about something."

"Stop psychoanalyzing," I snapped.

"It's not a weakness to share."

"I have nothing to hide," I said in my haughtiest voice.

"Just your fears."

"Excuse me?"

His voice rumbled in his chest. "You have always known my greatest fear. But you've never told me yours."

"Maybe you never asked."

"Maybe you never shared."

It was very possible that he'd asked and I changed the subject. It was something I'd do, after all. I knew exactly what my greatest fear was but did I want to reveal it? Knowledge was power. If someone knew too much about you, they had the ultimate weapon with which to hurt you.

He remained silent, waiting for my answer. My mind worked a hundred miles a minute, wondering if I wanted him to have the power over me.

Of all the people in the world, I trusted him the most. But he was still...a vampire. Different from me in every way. Yet alike in the way we were both outcasts. I couldn't trust humans, either.

I spoke quickly. "My greatest fear is to die. Not alone, like your fear." Yes, I had remembered his greatest fear.

To die alone.

"The actual passing, the idea of death. To just cease. To not even be a memory in the minds of anyone you've touched." It was close enough to my real fear of whether or not I had already died. For what would happen if I died again?

"You will always be remembered, *bella*. An Original Extinguisher."

"Such a thing to be remembered as! I had no choice. I did nothing," I mocked.

"That is not true. You had the will to live. Not an easy feat. Trust me, I've lived a very long time."

I smiled grimly. "Do I truly live, Ethan?"

"What do you mean?"

"I hold you at arm's length. And you..." I paused, unsure if I wanted to divulge this much information. "I trust you more than I've trusted anyone else in the world. I've shared more with you than any other person. Yet it's still not enough."

He brought my hand up to his mouth and kissed my fingers, small in his much larger hand.

"It is enough. For you, *bella*. It's enormous...for you. Don't feel as though you can't share enough. I will always want more of you, will even demand what you cannot give. You just move at your own pace."

He was giving me permission to be me? He truly baffled me. It was why I loved him.

Yet I would never tell him.

For now I enjoyed being wrapped in his arms, the scent of his skin beneath my nose. I didn't want this to end, the excuse for us to be alone. Together.

I breathed in perfect sync with the rise and fall of his chest. A mood was taking over me; my insides were liquefying and swelling.

Ethan's hands had stilled in their easy rubbing of my lower back. He'd sensed the slow change of my mood and waited for me to make the next move. For, dammit, my body hummed with adrenaline from facing the fight in my dreams. My loins curled with fever. He knew exactly what was going on. Ever since the drug Yohimbine had been introduced to my system, marking me forever by permanently dilating my eyes, I'd been helpless after the surge of adrenaline left me. It left me...insatiable.

"I don't want this," I said quickly.

"I know, *bella*."

So easy. He was giving me a choice, always setting his own wishes aside.

"Well, perhaps what I really mean is I'm not yet ready for this."

One of his clenched fists opened, splaying across the base of my spine, warming me with moist heat from his palm.

His voice was deep. "When will you be ready for me?"

"I'm not sure, Ethan."



"Know this, my love. I will liberate your body as it craves, nothing more, nothing less. Simply the mechanics of release. We do not need to even speak of it after."

No lovemaking? Just a raw need assuaged? The offer tempted me with its simplicity.

"No real sex? No penetration?" I asked, wanting it completely spelled out.

"No."

"And what do you get in return?" I was aware that my voice was completely distrusting. No one ever gave something for nothing. Not in my world. In fact, he knew better than to give me something unconditionally. I wouldn't respect him for that.

"I wish the pressure relieved too."

That was a setback. Now this was getting more like sex. Mutual orgasms. I had to think about it carefully but my arousal was getting even greater at the prospect.

"No mouths? Just...hands?"

"As you wish. You stroke me, I will finger you."

Wham! The coarse words were so unlike Ethan's normal speech, they unleashed instant lust, wetting my insides and uncurling waiting desire. My fist clenched against his chest and I dragged it down to the heat of his loins.

His erection was raised between us, pressing through the thin, soft material of his pants. He groaned when I brushed against it briefly to untie the laces at his waist.

My breasts fell heavy against his chest. I was wearing an oversized shirt of his and as far as I could tell, nothing else. My legs felt bare against the softness of his pants.

I rolled off him so I could fumble with the string of his waistband, frantically pushing the material down. He shoved his own pants off and his erection sprang forth.

Rolling atop me, he dragged it down my thigh.

I could have the fire assuaged with him pounding into me. No, I panicked. Resist the urge. Not yet, not while I was so overwhelmed with lust that I couldn't make a sensible decision.

Ethan sensed my fear.

"Lie back," he instructed. "Part your luscious thighs for me."

I raised the knee furthest from him and let it drop to one side, spreading my labia apart. His eyes lowered to the view.

His lids appeared heavy, as if it were too much trouble to even bother holding them open. One hand pushed my shirt up roughly over the tops of my breasts.

The rough handling was exactly right. Exactly what I needed. The reminder that this wasn't lovemaking, wasn't even sex. Just a basic function, a release.

Now I felt naked and exposed and...helpless. The last sensation fired lust in my loins.

Ethan ran his fingertip through my slit. I gasped a shocked breath at the sheer eroticism of the straightforward act.

"So hot and wet," he said in a strangled voice.

He dipped his finger into my entrance slightly, just enough to catch moisture to smear over my clitoris. He began to rub his forefinger over the sensitive nub.

My body yearned for release. Each caress of his finger heightened the slickness, preparing my sheath to receive him.

But that couldn't happen. Not while I was mindless with lust. I would regret the complete sex act.

"You won't let me lose control and fuck you senseless?" I asked him. It wasn't him I worried about but my own lack of control. I had a vision of me writhing over his body, him buried deep within my aching cunt, while I ground against him with wild abandon.

His voice sounded pained. "I promise."

I would have to trust the vampire. At this moment I didn't care much but later, much later I would. And I had trusted him in the past.

As if he sensed my need, he inserted two fingers deep into my pussy, using his thumb to continue to rub my glistening pearl. My hips arched wantonly to his hand but I couldn't stop or even worry about my reckless behavior.

Faster, faster, he swirled his finger over my now-throbbing clitoris. I wanted to beg him to bring me, hard and sure. I wanted to clench his fingers, to grip them as I would his cock.

He was rubbing his cock against my thigh, thrusting it as if he were inside me.

"I want your cock in my mouth," I said.

"Not this time," he muttered, teeth clenched. "You're too crazed to know what you really want."

He dropped his head to my breast. That in this moment he could honor my original wishes was a huge turn-on.

This was too delicious, too overwhelming. I moaned loudly, gasping when he rubbed a finger against the lip of my cervix.

"Feel good, *bella*?" he said, breath hot against the curve of my nipple.

"You have no idea."

His mouth opened and sucked my erect nipple against the warmth of his tongue. He sucked the peak harshly, wetly, insistently.

"Oh my lord," I moaned. I was so close to climax I was almost distracted as to which would bring me first, the clever fingers working my body as swiftly as I could work my own, or the insistent sucking of my breast. "Don't stop," I begged, so close to the edge. My head thrashed from side to side helplessly. "Yes, Ethan. Please." He was going to do it, make me climax hard and sure, it was looming within reach.

"Ethan, baby, make me come," I begged.

His rigid erection was bulging against my leg. His hips were twisting and pumping masterfully against me and all I could think of was, what a waste that he wasn't thrusting that beautiful cock deep inside me.

"*Bella*, you're going to make me come so hard...keep going," he said, breath heaving. "Fuck yourself on my hand."

I was thrusting my hips against his hand, grinding my clitoris against his thumb, hoping against hope his nail would flick harshly against the sensitive bud.

I was completely gone and knew exactly what I wanted. It was Ethan. I wanted the broad head of his cock knocking against my cervix, I wanted to lick the swollen shaft clean after he fucked me senseless. I had visions of climbing onto his face, pulling aside my labia to lower the exposed pink skin into his waiting mouth. Turning around so I could swallow his cock at the same time as he licked me, riding him until my breasts bounced and my body quivered with aftershocks.

He exploded with a roar, ejaculating on my thigh with warm, wet heat that spread wickedly. There was a moment's regret over the idea that the delicious hot cum could be spreading into my womb at this moment. I cursed my stubbornness.

My climax overtook me. It hit hard, searing through my body with a frightening intensity as if it struggled to incinerate me from the inside out. I clenched around his hand, warm wet waves spiraling on and on until I arched my back and screamed with pleasure.

The release was better than expected. My racing heartbeat calmed and Ethan stretched out, turning over and pulling my head onto his chest.

He never said a word. But he was worried, I could tell. Would I turn on him, angered with my lack of control?

Little did he know, I'd long since accepted my failures. Embraced them. After all, they marked me as human.

I traced his smallest finger with my index. Slowly, I touched all four of his fingers with the tips of mine and pushed them upward to raise his hand. At the same time, I placed my much smaller hand in his. As if by unspoken consent, our fingers laced.

His voice rumbled in his chest.

"It is all right?"

"Everything's fine," I murmured, lightly kissing the tattooed skin beneath my lips. "Thank you."

His hand closed over my mine, dropping back down. I closed my eyes, ready to sleep, my hand curled tightly in his.

It was symbolic, somehow. The beginnings of trust with the simple hand-holding.

## Chapter Six

Just as humans were amazed with my healing abilities, the vampires were too. They were curious creatures, overcoming their basic dislike of me to observe and sometimes whisper among themselves.

I hadn't had much contact with Ethan after our unspoken night of lust. He was giving me the space I needed. I knew he feared losing the little trust we'd built. Unfortunately, it put me into direct contact with the rest of the inhabitants of the cave.

Jordan's father, Reese, finally spoke to me. Naturally he was the bravest, being Ethan's friend and right hand.

"What was it like to have vampire venom injected into your veins?" he asked. "That's so unnatural. And dangerous. They could have killed you so easily."

The rest of the vampires were quieter than usual, as they strained to listen to the conversation.

"It was horrible. It burned out many of my veins and I lost my hair. Vomiting was inevitable. Like those old-fashioned cancer cures you read about. Chemotherapy. A lot of children did die from the poisoning but I was lucky."

"Why were you so young compared to the others?"

"I don't know. They had a chance to take me from my mother at three. They probably would have waited until I was eight but there were court battles in which I was bounced back and forth from her house to the training facility. They decided to speed things up in case the courts made the decision to return me to my mother permanently. Once I was in the process of being stricken, the court sent me to a neutral place, a church and I only had to return to the camp for treatments. For me, training came later. But the church fought back and got laws enacted to make eight the legal age before one can be stricken. Not that it mattered in my case." I shrugged.

"Then you don't really know your mother?"

"Not exactly. I know *of* her. The nuns at the church taught me what she was like. They taught me to love her. And at the Academy, I would frequently break into personnel files. I know of her like I know myself, by study."

"What an interesting concept! To love someone you have not seen? How is that even possible? Do you truly love, Extinguisher?"

My eyes narrowed. "I know nothing else. There is nothing to compare it to. It is love to me."

"But to not know your mother, your child, a sibling?"

"Ethan has no relatives about. Is he incapable of love also?" I sneered.

Reese's face wiped clean of emotion. His voice dropped to an icy whisper. "He did. Once. He had his mother and sister up until a few decades ago."

That was a shock. I never knew he had family. I'd always assumed he was as much a loner as I was. "What happened to them?"

"His mother was killed. One of us. His sister, raped first, before death."

He walked away before I could ask more questions. What did "one of us" mean? Did a vampire, *one of them*, kill her? Or did he mean she was *one of them*? A vampire?

I needed more information but Reese had walked away. Later that day in the camp, I listened to the vampires telling stories around me, trying in vain to entice me to talking again. I answered questions as briefly as possible, not offering any more information than was necessary. Because of my quiet state, Ethan insisted on treating me like an invalid.

"I'm fine," I said, exasperated. "I just need some alone time. I'm not used to nests, there are too many people here. I'll go find my own food, it'll give me a chance to relax. By myself."

He wanted to come, I know he did. But after succumbing to my own curiosities and finding out more than I cared to, I didn't want any more sharing. I didn't want to answer any questions about my own abilities. Why was I able to heal as quickly as I did without being vampire? I was always uncomfortable with my differences. Tired of being a circus show freak. Worse, a lab rat.

The sunshine was bright outside. I felt like a cavewoman in my torn and laced-up shirt and the mismatched skirt another female vamp had given me.

Being outdoors did make my stomach growl with hunger. Ethan had found a wild blackberry bush before. I could forage for berries to eat. Certain plants and leaves were also edible, however, not as tasty as the berries.

Ethan was worried that I might not find enough food in the wild to sustain me. He could be right. I had basic survival skills but they weren't meant for long-term existence. We could plan a trip into the nearest town to steal enough for me to live on. Dried meats, stuff like that.

I eyed a small rabbit hungrily. It wasn't yet mature enough to be very plump but hey, I heard they taste like chicken.

I sighed. I'd have to bypass my Kentucky Fried idea, or I'd horrify the blond, fuzzy-headed child spying on me.

I knew he was watching, of course. He was lucky I was experienced and not the slightest bit nervous, or he would have been staked long since.

For now, he hid behind a rock, not realizing wisps of blond stood straight up beyond the edge of where he hid. I almost sighed. He always looked like he rubbed a balloon back and forth over his head until his hair stood on end.

"What are you doing here, Jordan?" I called sharply. The vampire child from the cave always tried to follow me everywhere. His parents watched with a hawk's eye, but they bowed to Ethan's leadership.

"Watching you. How'd you know I was here? Whatcha doing?" His big eyes and blond fluffy hair made him look cherubic and I had to remind myself he was anything but.

"Eating."

"It looks funny. That chewing thing. You look like one of those cows that chomps the grass."

"It's not so attractive to watch you sink your fangs into someone," I muttered.

"Ethan said to Daddy if you would let him taste your blood, he can find out who you taste like."

"Who I taste like?"

"Who sired you."

"I was not sired," I said in my superior tone. Who did the kid think he was? "I was infected. I am not a vampire."

"Someone gave you his blood. We all should know who it was."

The thought never occurred to me. Somewhere was a nest waiting for the bastard to return. Vampires lived for centuries, although he'd been captured over twenty years ago, would it just be a brief period to a spouse? Or to his...spawn? Was someone waiting, or desperately in fear of his return, losing hope with each passing year, or driving themselves insane with nerves? Should their fears be put to rest so they could realize that yes indeed, he had been decapitated when his spine was ripped from his body?

"Ethan's not tasting me," I muttered, more to myself.

"Why, Aftie?"

"I don't feel comfortable with it." I didn't have a real answer. I couldn't share with the child that Ethan may get more than he bargained for should he taste my blood. For who knew what secrets it contained?

"How'd you know I was here, anyway?" he asked curiously.

"I sensed you."

"How come I can't sense you?"

I shrugged. "Because I'm not human?"

"I thought you were."

"Well I am," I snapped. "But different."

"You're an Extinguisher," he said, agreeably.

"Used to be."

"So you can morph like we do?"

"Yes." But morphing was dangerous for humans, it took a tremendous amount of energy, wasn't always predictable and could only be used in places you'd been to previously. Therefore, you could never guess if an Extinguisher could morph to you or not.

"Humans can't do that," Jordan continued.

"I know. Only vampires and other Extinguishers. Hey, does your daddy know where you are?"

"Nuh-uh."

"Well, you think he might be worried about you?"

"Nah."

"I think so. Come on, little guy."

I had just risen when I sensed the ripple of air that signified the arrival of an Extinguisher. Panic surged in my gut. Not now. Not while I had a child to protect. But there was no time to escape.

He materialized, fully armored, behind me.

Jordan's eyes grew wide with terror. Before he could even think to speak out a warning, I kicked behind me, connecting with the male groin.

There was a reason why females were better Extinguishers. We didn't have that one body part that meant instant immobilization, with or without a scream.

The Extinguisher recovered from his injury quickly enough, though I was sure he'd never sire children. He struck with his fist but I spun around and blocked it with my forearm.

I had a clear look at his face and held my shock. It was the first one, from the park. The one we suspected was infected with my blood. The one I couldn't sense that first day until Ethan later pointed out why. Now that I knew he shared my blood, I was more apt to be aware of him.

Fortunately, his own blood would regenerate over a few weeks time, completely diluting mine from his system. They wouldn't keep tainting him with it, for my blood was dangerous. It died, thickening and congealing. Spoiling without refrigeration, infecting him with death.

Had they known it was effective in keeping me from sensing his morphing, they might have infected others for that first element of surprise. But they would never suspect it, since this one would fail in his capture of me.

I had to distract him long enough so Jordan could dematerialize without the Extinguisher following. Problem was, Jordan was just a child. He didn't have the common sense to save himself.

Ethan would instinctively have known the plan. But this was Jordan, and there was no way I could signal him.

The Extinguisher hit me hard. Square in the breastbone, the punch knocked me back several feet and I landed on my ass in the dirt.

He moved in for the kill but I rolled and rose to my feet before he even realized I'd moved.

Men may have the power but women have dexterity. Strength. Stamina. And a pain threshold higher than most males. Still, I was weakened from lack of proper nutrition. Roots and berries weren't cutting it. That was the only reason why I decided to retreat instead of outright kill.

I could maim, though. Just to make a point to the rest of them.

He reached for my throat and held tight, expecting me to pull away. Instead I bent forward at the waist, locking his hand to me. Quickly. I bent his wrist backward until I heard it snap, then I struck him in the forearm. Another snap and his ulna was in two.

A raised knee connected with the elbow of the same arm, bending it at an unnatural angle. Bone three. Or four, depending on the radius. Not being a doctor, I wasn't sure if both had broken when I snapped his forearm like a twig.

It took a span of less than three seconds. Three seconds wasn't even enough time for his brain to register the idea to scream out his pain. He was still in shock mode that I'd quickly broken not one bone, but three, almost instantly.

He dematerialized immediately, taking his extra pieces with him.

I grabbed Jordan before we could be tracked and morphed right back to the cave.

We landed in the middle of it, a split second before Ethan burst in. "What happened?" he snapped, sensing the ripples in the natural balance of the universe.

"An ex-Exting-guisher," Jordan yelled, his overexcited voice way too loud in the strained silence of everyone else trying to listen.

"Are you okay?" Ethan asked, reaching for me, running his hand over my arms, my legs. My scarred shoulder. Checking for injuries, his touch stayed neutral.

"She's not broken. The other Extinguisher was," Jordan said.

Ethan looked sharply at me. "I didn't have the strength to terminate him." I still refused to think of harming a colleague as killing.

"You're still weakened."

"A little," I agreed. For it wasn't a lie. I had completely healed but I hadn't eaten enough to regain strength.

"But she broke his bones! I could hear them pop! It was gross, and one even came out of his skin. And did you see his elbow, Afton? Did you see how it bent the wrong way?" While Jordan was excited beyond belief, his mother looked a little green at the gills.

"Shh, little guy. Let's use a quiet voice," I murmured, after the quick glance at her.

"Okay but did you see it? And bones look funny, don't they? All white and bloody at the same time. Eww. But it was cool, how fast you could move. Even when you're sick. I don't think I could move that fast when I'm a grown-up vampire. I barely saw it, like a blur."



"Speaking of which, what were you doing with my son?" asked Reese.

I stared directly at Jordan. I was not taking the fall for this one. No way.

"Umm. I was just checking to see what she was doing, Dad."

"Pardon?"

"I, umm, was kind of spying on Afton. A little bit. She saw me."

"Are you supposed to morph out of the camp?"

"No, sir."

"Come with me."

Little Jordan knew better than to protest. He immediately followed his father, head down.

Ethan turned to me. "And you, Afton. Come with me."

One look from me and he added a word. "Please."

I walked the few steps over to him and he took my hand. It felt right and comforting and for the moment, I could pretend I needed him. That I didn't always rely only on myself. When we were out of earshot of the others, I asked where we were headed.

"I'll take you to the pond. You can wash the blood off you."

I glanced down, surprised. I hadn't been aware of any on me. It wasn't mine.

Sure enough, the spray of blood from the fight with the Extinguisher mixed with dust had caked into dirty mud over my arms and legs.

"We'll need to get you some new clothes."

"Ethan," I said gently. "The cold water will wash the blood out. I'm not staying. Not long enough to need a wardrobe. I need to move on."

"You have nowhere to run. You're an outcast. One of us."

"I'm not one of you. I'm not a vampire."

"You can be, *bella*. You've ingested our blood. Technically, you're halfway there."

My hackles rose. "I am human, Ethan. And I was stricken. I didn't ingest." How many times did I have to remind everyone of my humanity?

"I know, sweet. I know."

Maybe he just meant to pacify me but right now it was exactly what I needed. My heart raced and I breathed deeply, trying to control it. Nothing else got my adrenaline flowing as quickly as the conflict of my origins. And my blood was already heated from the fight with the Extinguisher.

A fact he knew well.

We'd reached the edge of a stream. It was unusually warm. The sun reflected from the rocks around the water's surface, sending tendrils of steam to rise gently. It was beautiful, calming and ethereal.

But then he turned me to face him, a look of despair racking his face. "Why, *bella*? Why did you up and leave me without looking back?"

I stared at him, studying each feature of his beautiful face. He waited for my answer, never aware of the clouds rushing across the sky on the silent demand of his emotions. I had to tread carefully, he could strike up a lightning bolt without even being aware of it.

It was so long ago, why did he just think to bring it up now? Yet I could recall every word we'd spoken as if it were yesterday.

"Tell me why you can't stay with me," he had demanded.

"What kind of a life would it be, Ethan? There's no white picket fence and kids. We can't even procreate, we're two different species. There's just blood and death and running."

"Your point?" he'd asked mildly, as if none of that were important.

"You live in a vampire nest. I'm a loner. I can't adapt."

"You can't adapt to living with others?"

"Not just others. Vampires. They are...you are...too different." I shrugged.

"You'll get used to us. Just as they'll get used to you."

"You're speaking for everyone."

"I am their leader."

"Let's just seize the moment. Not think about the future or forever or anything else."

He'd gripped my arm. His touch had been unusually rough, as apparently he was a man used to getting his way. "When will you understand you are mine? Not for now. Not for later. But always."

I had extricated his fingers from my arm. "There are lots of other people in the world. Don't attach yourself to one."

"Is that what they taught you as a child, *bella*?"

Oh, God.

"Dammit, Ethan. Why must you always bring up my childhood?"

His voice had been soft. "It makes you who you are today."

We'd been at a standstill, back then. We'd had this conversation a hundred times, with no resolution. A fork in the road, forced to turn right or left. But we were unable to continue the way we were. That was when I'd realized I'd have to steal away like a thief in the night. As soon as the decision was made, I'd wasted no time. I'd left immediately, leaving my demanding lover behind.

I snapped back to the present. "It was better that way. You were too possessive."

"You are like trying to catch the rain."

"My job was to catch you, Ethan."

"Instead you gave me many skills."

I sighed. "Maybe I didn't mean to."

"Maybe you did. Maybe you wanted me to be able to protect myself."

I didn't answer. Deep down, I didn't want to acknowledge the truth, which was, if I didn't kill him, along would come another Extinguisher. And another. Until eventually, Ethan would be taken down.

I couldn't bear that.

"Afton?" he prodded gently.

"Dammit, Ethan," I snapped. "What do you want from me? No, I can't bear to think of you being killed, all right?"

In response, the vampire raised the hem of his shirt and exposed unending ridges of abdominal muscles. The shirt rose higher until it bared well-defined pecs. It was finally flipped over his head and he stood bare-chested before me.

And tattooed.

For every time Ethan was scarred by silver, he endured more punishment. The burn of silver needles drilling ink into his body.

*Why?* I'd asked once.

*I refuse to focus on scars caused by the injustice of humans, he'd scorned. I'd rather gaze at markings I cause willingly.*

"You have some new ones," I murmured. "Apparently I didn't train you all that well."

I traced a doozy with the pad of my index finger. A muse, beautiful really, fluttered over his heart. Inwardly, I shuddered at how close the silver dagger had come for the tattoo to reside there.

"That one was my own fault," he replied vaguely. "But look closely."

I studied the muse. She almost looked like a mermaid, the graceful way her body curved. Her lower half gradually ended on a blur, the tail of a fish or a dream, either way you looked at it. Black hair cut shoulder length around a heart-shaped face. Eyes large and framed with thick lashes. Somehow, the artist hinted at a dimple in her pink-tinged cheeks. While I was stuck concentrating on how one physically draws the indentation well enough to allow a visual of a dimple, Ethan continued.

"I shall have to endure a touch-up to lengthen her hair." He reached out and twisted a lock of my hair onto his finger.

It was me, I realized. The muse. It was my own image.

"You've tattooed me? Onto your heart?"

"Need I continually remind you? You are my heart."

"Oh, Ethan. How can I say this again? You're a vampire. I'm an Extinguisher."

"You were. Now you've retired. And being hunted, much like my species, *bella*."

It was then that it dawned on me. He was right. Much more so than I'd ever realized.

God, were these creatures right about other things? Ethan once hinted that I was halfway a vampire myself. I wasn't completely human, as Jordan pointed out. I had the speed of a vamp, the ability to morph. Not human characteristics.

Terror clutched my heart. *Had I died?*

If I had, could I be some sort of mutated vampire right now?

When I was stricken, had it been enough to stop my heart? Had the human doctors shocked me back to life? No, it couldn't be. My teeth weren't sharper, my abilities were still human bound. I didn't need blood to survive. As long as I hadn't died, I couldn't be the vampire he wanted me to be. As long as I hadn't died, I was still the human I claimed.

Ethan watched my face and sensed my mood but knew enough not to pry. Instead he pulled me gently toward him, slowly enough that I could resist if I chose. I didn't. I welcomed the cocoon of his embrace, the sureness of his strength. It was the one thing I was certain about.

Ethan loved me unconditionally. He always had. In his own selfish way, he loved me like no other ever had.

I rubbed my cheek on his chest, solid and firm beneath my skin. "What is the symbolism behind your tattoos?" I asked.

"They're negative and positive images. Yin and yang. Balance between hatred and devotion. While the scar was caused by the penetration of a dagger at my heart, it was covered by the image of my love. Even though you left me, it was still a balancing act. Your desertion showed me how deep my feelings ran, a reminder of how I could not face an eternal existence without you in it."

"I'm human. One day I'll die," I warned.

"Not necessarily. I'd die protecting you."

I laughed at his macho concern. Sometimes he completely forgot I was a skilled assassin. "You don't understand. One day I'll grow old and die. You can't protect me from that."

He didn't respond for the longest moment.

"You don't know that, Afton."

"What do you mean?" I asked as I pulled away to look at him.

"You are one of the Originals. You have vampire attributes. How do you know longevity isn't one of them?"

The question baffled me. I'd never before thought of that. Oh, Lord, was I doomed to live this lonely existence forever?

"Of course I'll grow old and die," I said. "However, it's not a theory I'm willing to test."

He stared at me as if I'd never spoken. God, I'd missed him. When he looked so deeply into my own gaze, I was lost. And this time, I didn't have lust clouding my judgment.

"I love looking into your eyes," he whispered finally. "They remind me of cinnamon and chocolate."

He looked exactly the same as he had one year ago. The same penetrating visual I'd always had etched into my memory. His lips were sensual, his voice hypnotic. Danger with a razor-sharp edge.

He reached out with his tattooed left arm to brush a lock of hair behind my ear, tucking it gently. I turned and kissed the inside of his forearm, over the colorful art which decorated, yet became him.

Closing my eyes, I remembered how I'd kissed every inch of his warm skin.

His arm was unique. The treasured scenes were depicted by the elements—earth, rain, wind and fire. Raging seas, ships at sail. Bright inks, colorful scenes. A beautiful sleeve that covered horrific scars caused from years of battling.

Most by me.

"Tell me you love me," he demanded.

I almost outright refused. What did it matter, my fathomless love? Did it make up for the brimming hate I'd once almost killed him with? Or was he wanting it now before desire had us speaking of such things untruthfully?

He waited patiently, looking deeply into my eyes the way only he could. And I did the only thing I was able.

"I need you, Ethan. I always have. But I still don't know if I'm capable of love."

He pulled me to him, our bodies so tightly meshed there was not a hairsbreadth between us. "Never leave me again."

"I can't make promises."

"*Bella*, stop fighting me. You are like trying to hold the wind. It whistles through my fingers."

"You can't cage wind. Set me free."

"You are all I can keep."

One of the original vampires. Ethan had watched his loved ones die off, one by one. He'd once told me his greatest fear...dying alone. Who was left to be there for him? He'd succumbed to the overwhelming need and had infected his mother and sister way back when.

Apparently, they'd been killed as vampires, for he was alone now. He'd never converted another family member.

Was that why he worked so hard at keeping me, another freak, around? A convenient mate?

Was my lifespan a surprise, like so many others of my virus-enhanced attributes? A gamble he was guessing on? Hoping for longevity?

Even though I rarely showed it, the man pulled things from me that no one else ever had. I traced his jawline with my index finger. I knew his greatest fear.

To die alone.

And as long as I lived, he'd never face it. As long as I lived, I protected him.

"I want you. Every day, I need you," he murmured.

I silenced him with a fingertip dipped into his mouth, where he bit the tip gently, then sucked the sting away.

"If you don't get me, will you throw another temper tantrum?" I murmured, with a teasing lilt.

It was enough to make him smile. "I cannot control my urges," he reminded. "But there are no humans around to get hurt."

I sometimes wondered if he even knew. If he was aware of how powerful his urges had become. "So you say."

"Kiss me, Afton. Please. I've missed you."

I never thought to refuse. I lifted my mouth to his. His kisses were exactly the way they should be, slow and long.

I craved the ecstasy his kisses could bring. I welcomed his tongue, dancing with it as our passion flared. At this moment, I was unconditionally sure I loved him.

Around us, the wind picked up pace and howled.

The rush of desire hit full force, intense in its sudden ferocity. He left my lips to string heated kisses down my neck. Ever so slowly, his hand fluttered to my waist, just beneath my top. Heat radiated from his palm as if by magic. He raised the edge, caressing the tender skin beneath my clothing. When I didn't protest, he moved it up higher to bare a breast.

He palmed it fully, caressing its heavy weight and then fingered my nipple. Pulling, pinching lightly, striking fire as my temperature rose.

"Every single day, I craved you. Not one went by that I didn't think of you," he murmured.

"I'm ready this time." I pulled him to me, rubbing my pelvis against the hardness in his pants, letting him know I desired him just as much. My need was heightened with acceptance of my decision, I just couldn't fight the feelings any longer.

He pulled my top over my head. We both stood bare from the waist up, breast to chest. I pressed myself against him.

My skirt was pushed from my hips and he followed with his pants. My eyes following his erection, thick and proud, jutting from his body. I couldn't resist reaching out and feeling the strength of it as I stroked it with my palm.

It had been so long. The skin was soft, silk wrapped over the massive strength that could bring so much pleasure. Wide as it was, I could hardly wrap my hand around it. I shuddered in anticipation when I imagined it poised at my entry.

"I missed you," I admitted.

"There is so much to make up for," he said. "Are you sure?"

The day was warmer than I realized, with the sun beating upon the rocks of the stream. Very slowly, we entered the water, deeper and deeper. He was taller than I, so it was easy to wrap my weightless legs around his waist. Easy and teasing as I kissed him wantonly and I felt his cock prodding against my labia. But I lifted myself just enough to keep him from entering.

He caressed my wet skin endlessly, teasing me, stroking me.

He cupped my breasts, bringing them together and rubbing his thumbs over my nipples. Finally, he leaned down to capture one between his teeth.

"About time," I groaned as he sucked fully.

He grinned, rising up slightly so he was against my neck. "When will you learn to ask for what you need, *bella*?"

I didn't need to answer, for we both knew that day would never come. Showing your wants and desires made you vulnerable. Weak.

His hands drifted down to my hips. With his thumbs, he stroked my hipbones. Sensitivity fingered over my midsection, fanning out like licks of flames.

I dropped my head onto his shoulder.

Slowly, he trailed his hand lower, to part my labia. Before I knew it, his finger delved in, stroking rapidly in and out. My head jerked up to look at his face.

I was entranced with his eyes. They shone, almost seemed lighter, the amber of honey. I moaned. I was so ready for his touch. Impatient, even.

I ground my hips against his hand, where his fingers were buried in my cunt.

"You're so hot inside," he muttered, kissing my temple. "I need you."

"Do it," I muttered.

"Soon, *bella*. Soon."

"Then get us out of the water, Ethan," I demanded. "I want to be able to touch you as well."

He walked back to the edge, where the water lapped gently at his ankles. I unwrapped my legs from around his waist and knelt before him.

Finally.

I traced his magnificent cock with my tongue, hearing his groan when his cool skin touched the warmth of my mouth. He was perfect.

"My God, *bella*. I'd forgotten —"

"Sssh," I hummed against his skin. The vibration stopped his speech. Gently I slid my tongue along the underside of his erection, all the way to the base. I sucked a testicle into my mouth, rolling it wetly.

He was thrusting against my lips, stroking his own cock while I licked his balls. He took the swollen head of his erection and aimed for my lips.

I sucked the very tip hard, making him gasp. His fingers tangled in my hair. "*Bella*, that's good," he muttered.

He pulled his cock from my mouth and rubbed it alongside my cheek, letting us both catch our breath. "Too much and I won't last," he said.

I smiled against him, turning to kiss the side of his penis.

"Turn over," he said.

I turned onto my knees, eager for more. I felt sexy, exposing my bare ass so he could mount me, waiting for the feeling of being filled solid with his thick cock.

I arched in surprise when his lips settled onto my sex instead, sucking my labia into the warm cavern of his mouth. Then his thumbs spread my nether lips wide and he licked his tongue up my entire slit. Slowly, he speared his tongue into my entrance.

"Ahh, Ethan," I moaned.

I felt his face moving back and forth as he kissed me rhythmically, licking and sucking alternately.

"You taste so sweet, *bella*. I've always wanted to lick you from behind. This reminds me of when you were so wicked as to sit on my face."

His favorite memory. I'd lost complete control, grinding my pussy onto his face. The idea shot a scorching thrill through me. It had been the most erotic time of my life, no-holds-barred, down-and-dirty sex.

He gave me one last slurp and I watched his shadow move along the ground. He shifted to his knees, his erection thick and strong. His hips moved forward and I eagerly pressed back, excited for the exquisite sensation of him filling me. I creamed in anticipation.

He entered slowly and I savored the moment of fulfillment.

I craved this feeling, the connection between our intimate flesh, the moment in time when he pressed inside me. He fit perfectly, sliding into my swollen core like a hot knife through butter.

I tossed my head back at the sense of utter, complete fullness. The wonderment at this feeling deep within me. A feeling I thought I'd never have again.

"You've stopped the rage," I said suddenly. The air wasn't howling, the water wasn't rippling with anger.

"You're not fighting me," he said calmly.

In response, I pulled slightly forward, only to thrust my pelvis into him again, sliding against his wet body. His hands gripped my buttocks, holding me pressed



against him as tightly as he could. He rocked his hips in a circular motion, pushing deeply into me. Rocking against me, slapping my labia with his testicles.

"Play with your clit," he rasped. "I can't go slowly this first time and I can't use my hands to ready you. Do it for me."

If only he knew I was ready to explode already. Just as he was.

But if it was a show he wanted... I exaggerated the motion for the shadow. I leaned back on my knees and deliberately let my hands roam over my breasts and down the flatness of my belly. I slid my hand down my body farther, between my legs.

"That's it. Exactly," he muttered hoarsely.

"I want to see you," I said, pulling away from him and turning quickly. I opened my legs and fingered myself, spreading my folds apart for him.

He surged forward, pressing the head of his cock between them to enter.

My breath was quickening and for the first time I noticed his. It came in short pants, along with mine, a mutual rhythm. His eyelids were heavy, a sultry look as he fought losing control before me.

His hips bucked and in return, mine rotated in wide circles.

And then he inhaled deeply, his eyes widening.

I caught my breath as I stared into them. What I saw in his soul frightened me. The emotion was past possessive, as if I was his. Yet I couldn't pull away as the mutual release ripped through our bodies.

The explosion was exquisite in its ferocity.

"Bella!" Ethan yelled, caught in the throes of his orgasm, staring into my eyes.

When my waves subsided, he finally looked up to the sky, enabling me to tear my gaze away as if I were caught in a spell. He lowered his body to rest atop mine and I rested my head to the crook of his shoulder, where I could press my lips against his neck, inhaling his clean scent.

And wonder about what I'd seen in his soul. Possession. Trust. Determination. Domination.

Love.

Our bodies relaxed, neither of us had to speak. My legs were still wrapped around his waist but his cock had softened and slipped from me. I enjoyed holding him close as he rubbed comforting circles on the small of my back.

Everything around us was calm and peaceful. The faintest gurgling could be heard up ahead where the water gently splashed the rocks.

I knew what was coming.

His voice was deep when he spoke. "Do you see what I mean? This is what we have. We belong together."

"We have a moment in time. It doesn't make up for everything else, for all we have to go through, for all we have to do."

His hands stilled. "You still seek to leave me?"

I didn't want to hurt him. Never that but that was why I had to leave. He wouldn't understand, so I tried to explain a different way.

"Ethan," I said gently. "Extinguishers came after me and placed Jordan in danger. It's not safe to bring your entire camp into crossfire."

"It was a fluke. Jordan should not have morphed from the cave, he will not do so again."

"Don't you see? I have to do this. I have to find out why they want me."

I unwrapped my legs from him and pulled away as I waded to the rocks. He followed.

"You have been an experiment all your life. The best one. One of the Originals and the only one ever to reach retirement. What do you think they want of you?"

I flipped my torn top over my head and shimmied into my skirt. The old word came to mind. *Bred*.

He continued on. "They wish to cut you up and see what made you tick. See how to re-create you well enough to be able to control the next clone they make of you."

"If that were the case, they would never have let me go. Don't you see? I need to do this."

"Know this, Afton. I will always seek you. You cannot keep from me."

I felt trapped. Again. Slowly suffocated, the humanity stripped from my soul to be wholly replaced with the vampire infection. That was what I saw in his eyes. A contagion I couldn't escape.

He needed me to be as he was.

That was exactly what Ethan wanted. His own vampiress. It was then that I knew I'd be on the run from two sources. The government and my lover.

"What is it you want from me?" I whispered, needing him to voice it.

"Stay."

"Why? I will not be your vampire whore, to be hated by vampires and humans alike."

"Hated by all? Not all vampires are evil. Just as not all humans are good."

"I know that," I snapped. "I am not a child."

He continued as if I didn't speak. "I myself would call that *human* government camp evil."

"And the vampires good?" Because I knew otherwise, each one I'd extinguished had been worth it.

"Not all."

"Point out where the evil lies, Ethan," I challenged. He'd never before spoken poorly of anyone in his own race, I was positive he thought them better than the humans.

"A long time ago, there was one. It was a difficult decision, to make...you would call it exterminate. We decided he was too evil to be allowed to wreak havoc on mankind."

"You killed one of your own?" I couldn't believe it, not the righteous Ethan.

He stared ahead, lost in remembrance. "He was a monster when he was human. For some reason, when he crossed over, he was unnatural. But sly. It took centuries to see it."

I regretted every instance in which I'd scorned killing a vamp over killing a human. It never occurred to me that Ethan might have had to as their leader.

"You had to exterminate him? Who was he?"

"My stepfather."

Ethan killed a family member? I stared in disbelief.

"Yes. I left him to bleed to death in the rising sun. I wanted to do so much more but I was the leader. I couldn't let it be a personal killing, it had to be a judgment call for the greater good of the clan."

He turned away from me to dress.

That was the most painful way to die. Natural UV rays stole regenerating abilities from vampires. Left in the sun, the dying vampire had felt every drop of blood that left his body. He felt every unnatural year that rolled by during his death. Some said a vampire was forced to endure a karma-induced balancing, reliving every sin he'd made against others. Feeling every horror he'd caused threefold.

When Ethan finished dressing, I reached for his shoulder. He turned toward me. "How long ago?" I asked.

He shrugged. "I don't remember exactly. A quarter of a century."

But I'd bet my life Ethan knew exactly how long it had been. Down to the year. The month.

The very time of day.

We walked back to the cave in silence. When we reached it, Ethan grabbed my hand. "I love you, Afton. Don't even think about trying to get away."

## Chapter Seven

The skies were darkening early. Gray storm clouds rolled across the brilliant purple of the night. I watched from my balcony patio, bemused.

Saddened.

Lonely.

Wondering if I had done the right thing by sneaking away again. Ethan had taken me into a town to shop. There was an underground system where merchants catered to vampires. We shopped until I was back to my usual garb of leather boots and skintight black clothing. Covertly, I studied the town, planning where I would head for my escape. With a new wardrobe, I knew I could blend with the people.

With sunglasses, I could walk during the daylight.

But I refused to reminisce on a stormy night. *Stop it*, I chided myself. *You are used to being alone. We enter this world alone and we die alone.*

Die alone. Ethan's greatest fear.

Why did my thoughts keep returning to him? What was he doing, right now? Was it raining back at the cave, just a few droplets hitting here and there, like it was now? Was he watching the same storm I watched? Were the vampires even at the cave dwelling, or had they moved on to another location?

Just as I'd moved on. I lived in a small apartment like a human now. I hadn't yet met my neighbors and had no desire to.

Still, I missed him with every breath I took. When we had been together at the underground merchants, no one blinked when they saw a human paired with a vampire. As a matter of fact, I would even venture to say Ethan was well respected despite his race.

He didn't bother to hide his affection for me. While I studied a silver-bladed knife, he wrapped his arms around me and kissed my neck, making it plain for all to see our relationship.

"Take it, *bella*. Why try to decide if you should or not? Just do it."

"I'm spending your money. I'd like to spend it wisely."

"What's mine is yours, just like you possess my heart. Take the knife."

He'd insisted on buying it, along with an expensive leather duffel bag full of my black signature clothing. I'd almost changed my mind about leaving him.

But when we returned to the cave, my transformation triggered an interesting wariness from the vampire tribe. My conversion back to black reminded them of the Extinguisher uniform. The Extinguisher in their midst.

I knew Ethan was disappointed in his people. They couldn't seem to accept me and who could blame them?

He tried to make amends for them. "I forgot to give you this," Ethan said. In his hand he held a leather twine necklace. "Jordan wanted you to have it. His first loss."

He looped it around my neck and I glanced down to see a tiny fang. It was a sweet gesture. "Wow, he bypassed the vampire tooth fairy to give this to me?"

"He loves you," Ethan said simply.

I said nothing. But the cherubic face entered my mind, the fluffy hair tumbling every which way. The sweet face I hadn't seen since my return with the black clothing. He'd been kept away.

That was when I decided my original plan to leave was for the best. That night, I hungered for him. We made wild, frantic love. When dawn broke and he collapsed from exhaustion, I pressed a final kiss to his lips and snuck out with the morning light. While I was tired, the sun didn't drain me physically, like it would him. Added to that, I waited 'til he relaxed in a vampiric slumber. It would lull him, then the sunlight would prevent his rise.

I knew I couldn't stay long in town. I had to escape quickly, while Ethan was exhausted from staying up all night and then having the sun rise so early. Mentally, he'd try to pull himself from his unconscious stupor, the vampire kind of sleep, but physically his body would be too exhausted to cooperate.

My means of travel was a train. It ran straight through the middle of town. I was a hop, skip and a jump from somewhere. I just didn't yet know where I was.

Now, I'd traveled to my destination. I had settled in the town of Hastings. It was sixty miles from Coven, in which there was a mental institution.

For years, I had deliberately avoided the town where my mother lived. I could never have the government suspect I was interested in her, by having any business in the nearby vicinity.

I hid in the shadows of the night on the grounds of Concord Clinic. At first glance, it looked like an expensive golf course, lush lawns of rich green, cut evenly across the yard. The clinic was modest, painted a stark white with black metal railing for the windows with balconies.

A tree with large, thick branches was planted near the building, which enabled my climb. I swung onto a balcony on the second floor and looked up. Two more floors. Grasping the metal bars of the balcony directly above me, I pulled myself up a floor. Then I climbed farther, to the fourth floor, figuring I may as well start at the top.

There was a screen door separating the balcony from the main room. Pushing it aside, I crossed the threshold.

An older man was strapped to his bed, machines beeping. He was so drugged out his unfocused eyes stared to a point beyond me. I walked passed him and poked my

head out the front door that connected with the hallway. No personnel in sight. A chart hung on the wall next to the door.

I skimmed the personal information. Joseph Millicotti, sixty-eight years old. Had been committed with Alzheimer's when he was in his early forties.

I paused. That didn't make sense, no one contracted the disease at forty. It had to be a typo. I moved farther down the chart.

A danger to society because he had been a willing blood donor for vampires. An ex-priest who believed vampires were our brethren, put here among us for a reason, and we should help them out.

The government certainly put a stop to his beliefs and donations. His chart listed so many narcotics, he was kept in a drugged stupor.

Personally, I had a soft spot for those who dedicated their lives to their religion. As I'd told Reese, the church had taken me in as a child. There had been a long battle with the government over the rights to keep me without full parental consent when the Academy of Extinguishers was first created. I'd always be grateful to the nuns there, one in particular who had taught me child's prayers.

Along with Millicotti's chart was a map of the fourth floor. Bingo. My finger ran down the alphabetical listing, finding the name I was looking for.

Virginia Reis. Room 452. I rolled my eyes. The best security they could think up was to place her on the highest floor?

I headed straight for her room. Things got noisier down the hallway. The babble of incoherent voices, some TVs. Throat dry with trepidation, I turned the handle to her door to find it locked.

I nearly crushed it with my frustration. Why the hell was a door in a mental hospital locked from the outside? Normally, patients were locked in to keep them from wandering out.

I inhaled deeply, forcing myself to think. I didn't want to leave any traces of my visit. Never burn your bridges if you could help it.

I reached for Virginia's chart near the door.

It was still attached to the clipboard. The hospital thought to save a step of needing a separate clipboard and a cardboard file folder, combining the two to make a large plastic folder. I took the plastic file folder from her chart and inserted it between the door jamb and the lock. It took a couple of tries before it clicked. I shook my head. What they'd succeeded in creating was a flexible credit card capable of unlocking doors. It clicked easily and I pushed the door open.

Virginia Reis sat in a rocking chair, legs drawn up like a child. She looked like me but different. With red hair. She was extremely young, only twenty years older than me, she could have been my sister instead of my mother. She was delicate where I was strong. And her eyes were vacant. Even though she looked right at me, she looked through me at the same time.

She hugged her legs to her. "I know you."

"Do you?"

"I had a dolly. She looked like you."

I cringed. There was once a child's doll modeled after me. Dressed in black leather with permanently attached, dark sunglasses.

Virginia looked at me expectantly, so I responded. "What happened to your dolly?"

"Taken away," she moaned. "And I took such good care of her. I braided her hair every day."

The hopes I had were dashed. Gibberish was all she spoke. How would she ever have seen the Extinguisher Barbie when locked in this place? Still, I played along, just to keep her talking.

"Where'd you get her?"

She rocked in the chair, looking away. A panicked, frenzied rocking, like an autistic child's. I followed her gaze.

Draped around her window were silver chains. I headed to it without thinking. Old necklaces, pieces of metal jewelry, strung together. Silver that had never once been cleaned was now tarnished to black.

"Don't touch those!"

"Why not?" I asked softly.

"That's how I know they're working. Monsters can't touch them or they'll turn silver again. I check them every single day."

She knew something of vampires to know they couldn't touch true silver. There was not one piece of costume jewelry on the wall, it was all genuine silver, including the decorative chains stringing them together. My heart began to beat a little faster, this time with fear. My fear of the truth.

Why was Virginia Reis afraid of vampires?

"Why are you afraid of the monsters? Wasn't it humans who locked you up here? Who took your dolly from you?"

More frenzied rocking.

"Virginia?"

"They pretend to be humans but they're not!"

"Who pretends?"

Her hospital gown slipped off one shoulder with her furious swaying. Scar tissue threaded around a breast, twisting like a patch of tangled weeds.

"Virginia, you're safe. I would never let anyone hurt you."

She stopped her rocking. "You'll save me?"

I knelt down before her and placed my head in her lap. She smelled of wild lavender, of open fields and wind. "Of course. But you know, there are other good

people here. Like Mr. Millicotti, around the corner on this same floor. Room 403." A human who didn't believe the lies of the government. Surely he had coherent moments in which to talk.

Her fingers reached out to touch my hair. "So soft," she whispered. "It would look good braided. Lots of teeny, tiny braids will swing when you walk. What's this?"

She'd found the twine around my neck that had Jordan's lost tooth threaded through it. "It's a tooth," I said.

"It's a fang," she countered, matter-of-factly.

Would she freak out that I wore a vampire fang around my neck? Would she take it as I was friendly with them? Or would she consider it a notch in my belt? A vampire kill in which I saved a part of him, like an amputated trophy?

She didn't say another word, just fingered the small fang thoughtfully.

"I need to hurry," I said. "Before they know I was here to see you."

She nodded, but how lucid she was I couldn't tell. I knew one way to test her. What was the dolly? A Barbie? Or something else?

"Virginia, tell me about the dolly's father."

\* \* \* \* \*

The wind lifted my hair, breaking my recollections of my visit with my mother. I pulled my wrap tighter around my shoulders, for even though it wasn't cold, some innate sense made me shiver. In the past, someone might have used the phrase "walked over my grave".

But the weather was slowly changing right before my eyes. While the wind wasn't blowing, it was definitely stirring.

*Bella.*

The whisper carried on the wings of my imagination. Only one person ever called me that. I dismissed the whole idea that it could possibly be his voice. But there it was again, a little stronger, perhaps because this time I listened for it. I strained, wondering if I would drive myself insane in the end, rambling of winds and voices.

Much like my mother.

*Bella.*

My lips parted. "Ethan."

Now the night grew chilly, the wet droplets cold against my skin.

*My love.*

"You're not real." I spoke aloud, hoping to shock my brain into reality. My voice wasn't as strong as I expected, though not quite a whisper like I heard his as being.

*Take a look around.*

I refused to turn my head, though now I was sure he spoke.



*I'm the beating of your heart. You will never be separate from me.*

I spoke aloud still. "Someday my heart will stop."

*Our love continues on. Like the raindrops falling down.*

Surprise caught my breath. Did he know it rained? That the droplets pitter-pattered on the concrete of the balcony? He had grown powerful. He had never before managed to connect with me over a distance as great as that between us now.

And then I felt it. Satisfaction on his end. He was satisfied that I was aware of his increased power. Why would that be important to him? I always knew of his strength. His ability to control the minds and bodies of others with his blind lust for me.

*Not lust.*

I covered more shock that he knew what I thought. My brain conjured the correct word. Love. But I refused to say it. Instead, I said, "What do you want of me?"

*Your peace in finding what you seek. Then return to me.*

I sighed into the crisp night. "It's not that easy."

*You always make life difficult.*

"You refuse to acknowledge the difficulty."

*Either come to me, or I'll come to you.*

"I have something to do."

*What?*

"I need to go visit..." I paused, for once again, knowledge was power. How much did I want him to have?

*Who?* His voice insisted and I was driven to respond.

"My mother."

The information was wrenched from me. Anger raged within me that he took my will, forced me to respond to him with his vampire trickery. So even though I'd visited her recently, I refused to share the details with him of the visit I'd already made. I would let him believe that it was upcoming.

But it was all I needed to say and suddenly he was there. Manifested as easily as a swirl of fall leaves twisted beneath a whirlwind that begins the tornado.

"It's something I should do myself," I said wryly, still shocked with his aggressive actions.

Powerful didn't begin to describe him. I was pulled to him as easily as if I wore magnetic clothing. My feet slid across the balcony as though it were an ice skating rink.

I slammed into him and he caught me with open arms. "You will not go alone," he muttered, as his lips descended to mine.

As easily as that, the hint of the impending storm was over. We stood in the warmer night air, the moonlight shining upon our hair. And as easily as that, I wanted to believe that I didn't have to be alone.

But his growing power scared me, along with the fact it took him so little time to find me. I'd only been gone a week, while it took a year to hunt me down last time.

He gripped my hair, pulling my head back. He slid his lips down the side of my neck, scraping his fangs along the outstretched tendon. My breath caught. I knew how little control he had when he inhaled deeply, as if he could smell the rich scent of blood just beneath my skin.

And if I wasn't so afraid of the secrets he'd find hidden in the taste of my blood, I'd let him bite. The need blazed like a tidal wave in me, responding to the yearning call in him.

His was fed from anger. Though I'd never admit it, mine was fed from fear. But could Ethan find out how much vampirism ran rampant through my genes by tasting my veins? Was it more than the human DNA in my blood?

"Ethan," I began.

"Not a word, Afton," he snapped, his patience at an end. "Not now."

He bent and easily lifted me. Had he always been so large? Of course he had, he'd always towered over me. I'd just never paid attention, as I was busy fighting him most of my life. But this was different and now I appreciated his size. For once in my life, I didn't mind being swept up.

He flung open the double French doors of my balcony and made his way directly to my bedroom, as if he was impatient. Wanton desire stirred deep inside me, dueling with the beginning of fear.

He deposited me on the bed, grinding his mouth to mine. Lust overrode any fear as I tasted the need in him. My shawl had been lost long ago, discarded along with my inhibitions. His fingers stroked slowly upward along my breastbone as if searching for buttons to my silk pajamas. Finding none, his large hands grasped the fabric and ripped.

The tearing was harsh in the silence that contained only the sound of our labored breathing.

The air touched my breasts, taunting my nipples into stiffened peaks.

His hands reached down and cupped both. His touch hadn't gentled and I didn't want it to. He squeezed masterfully and I arched my back, wanting him to take them into his mouth.

I ran my hands underneath his black turtleneck, feeling his harsh intake of breath at my touch.

"Hands off, Afton. I have no patience."

I looked into his eyes. They glowed with a strange light. Deliberately, I let my hands fall back to the bed, wrists up, dangerously taunting him with the tiny blue veins outlined against the pale skin.

He glanced down and lingered over the sight.

He grasped the waistband of my silk shorts and yanked them down my thighs. Then he pushed my legs up and apart at the knees.

I was splayed open and glistening when his tongue touched me. My head dropped back on the bed and I felt the flames incinerate me.

He was ruthless as he pushed and prodded needs from me. My breath grew to ragged gasps as my insides liquefied, preparing me to receive him.

Just thinking about him grinding and thrusting into me sent me into harsh spasms when his tongue stopped its antics. Instead, his mouth covered my entire sex and wickedly sucked. The orgasm was relentless, going on and on until I pushed his head from me weakly. I lay back, catching my breath.

His eyes were still angry when he looked up at me. He stared for long seconds before he deliberately lowered his mouth to my quivering flesh again.

I was so sensitive I gasped. He was much gentler now, giving me long licks instead of sucks and nibbles. And slower, taking his time after that first harsh and violent orgasm.

"Ethan, what are you doing?"

"It's obvious, is it not?"

"But I already —"

"You will again. And again. And the next time you run, you'll remember this lesson between you and me. I've given you your way for far too long now."

He stopped talking then and inserted two fingers into my swollen sheath, curling them upward and then massaging. He sucked tender flesh into his mouth.

I grabbed a pillow and leaned forward to watch him. He worked my body again, until the rolling waves of pleasure washed over me anew.

Still he didn't stop. "Ethan, no more," I begged.

He began to trace patterns with his tongue, spiraling up my hip, around my navel. He kissed all the way up my abdomen and then ran his tongue underneath the crease of my breast.

His fangs were distended. I could feel them scrape against my flesh as he kissed my entire breast. He was angry, in a possessive mode. And I was his.

My body was still sensitive, humming with pleasure. He began to suck my breast and inserted his fingers into my already soaked sheath.

"You're so wet," he muttered, thrusting them deep.

"And you're so hard," I said softly, to remind him of his own pleasure.

He looked up at me. I couldn't define the emotion in his eyes.

"Let me touch you?" I cajoled.

"No."

I curled my arm around his neck, knowing he couldn't resist for long. I was right, he brought his lips to mine and I kissed him hungrily. He met my mouth eagerly,

inserting his tongue. I felt his erection press against my hip and I spread my legs apart even more, forcing him to press against my spread lips.

The head of his cock rubbed along my slit, stirring into the slippery juices.

"Please, Ethan. I want you inside me."

"Why?"

Ahh, still angry. I spoke as I punctuated with kisses. "Because. I. Want. You. Only you. Always and forever."

It was the right answer.

"Did you miss me, *bella*?" His voice was unsure.

I answered honestly. "Of course I did. I thought of you every single minute of the day. I wondered what you were doing—" I gasped when the thick head of his erection pushed into me. It went no farther, just paused, right there at the verge of my opening.

I tilted my pelvis up, hoping to get more of him.

"Please," I begged.

One of his fingers traced circles over my wet cleft, every now and then sliding over the sensitive flesh of my clitoris. "You beg so sweetly, my love. Tell me you're sorry."

"I am. Let's talk about this later, please. I need you so much."

He pushed all the way into me and I took a deep breath, savoring the feeling of being filled with him. He pulled out and rocked his hips against me. Together we moved, faster and faster, until I wrapped my legs around his waist in a rush of uncontrollable writhing. I clutched his shoulders, feeling my fingers glide over his damp skin.

The vibrations ripped through my body, exploding through every nerve ending I had.

He groaned and collapsed, his forehead pressed to my shoulder. I caressed the taut muscles in his back, every now and then letting my hands roam down to feel his muscular butt.

His breaths ran ragged.

"Why?"

One word. So simple and yet so complicated. Why did I leave him? Or why did I want to visit my mother without him?

"I needed to. I have things to do."

"Like what?"

"They wanted to breed me, Ethan. I have to find out what made me different from the other Extinguishers, so different that they won't let me go. They're determined to re-create me."

He held me tight. "How are you going to find out?"

"I already told you. My first step was to find my mother."

"Were you going to return to me?"

I ran the tip of my finger down the side of his face. "When it was safe."

"I will go with you," he said arrogantly.

I could have told him I'd already been once. But I didn't.

"I'm not sure if I can face what I find. I don't know how you'll react."

"My reactions do not matter. I am here to support you through yours. I know you love me, *bella*. Now you must learn to want me and need me."

"What do you mean?"

"We were meant to be together. Together we will be. If I have to, I'll follow you. But you'll never be apart from me."

## Chapter Eight

It was a long drive, though out of consideration for Ethan, my rental car had tinted windows to deflect most of the sun's rays.

"How do you know where she's kept?" he asked.

"I've been watching her for a year."

"You've never made contact?"

"Not previously. They'd moved her after my retirement and I couldn't let them suspect any interest on my part, or they might up the security now."

"Where is she?"

"Concord Clinic."

"You never answered my question of how you know where she's kept."

I sighed. I was quite aware of not giving him that information and should have known he wouldn't give up easily. "When I left the lab, I took my records."

"Records?"

"Everything they had on me. Every file, every sample, every video tape of my life. I would rather destroy them than allow the government access to my personal information."

"They just let you walk away with all that?"

"They had no choice. There was too much media attention on the first Extinguisher to reach retirement age for them to renege and not allow my departure."

"But to allow you personal records? Didn't they claim they were government property?"

"If I'd let them have their say, I'm sure they would have. However, I took everything and never asked. By the time they filed formal paperwork demanding the return of the files, it was too late. I'd destroyed it all. My argument was the files were my personal property."

The car rolled to a stop on the grassy grounds of the hospital. I turned the key, shutting off the engine. It looked very different in the light of day.

"How do you intend to enter?" Ethan asked, breaking my silence.

"I was planning to infiltrate as one of their employees," I said, sarcastically aware of the fact that I dressed in skintight black, while their uniforms were white.

He didn't skip a beat. "Risky. They could have the same employees for years, a new face would stand out."

"Plan Two was to have myself committed as a patient."

Now he got it. He looked straight at me, his gaze sharp. "Funny."

I smiled. "Did you have a better idea?"

"We simply sneak in."

"Ethan," I said patiently. "The government committed her. They don't know I'm aware of where she's kept because they've moved her since I took my files but surely they're on the lookout for a human female paired with a vampire?"

"Then we separate. I can take care of setting a distraction, *bella*. Unless they have silver lining in the hospital?"

"They shouldn't," I said slowly. "I'm sure I would have noticed it when I studied the blueprints. Plus, they would have used all the silver they could in the underground facility, never suspecting that one day a human and a vamp would want to break into a mental institution."

"That's it, then. I'll provide your diversion, you get what you need and we'll meet back here at the car."

He grabbed me with an arm hooked around my neck. "*Bella*, be careful." His lips closed over mine. "Okay, go," he commanded, while he took off for the front door. I darted around the back of the building and waited.

I knew exactly when the commotion started. Hospital guards and personnel began to run across the lawn, toward the front of the building. I waited a few minutes, then leapt up, grabbing the bottom rung of a second floor balcony.

It was amazing how untrained the hospital personnel was. Not once did any of the guards bother to look anywhere but straight ahead to the front doors. I pulled myself up and over by swinging my legs over the bar and flipping up.

I studied my surroundings. I knew which window was Virginia's and climbed up to it. I momentarily paused. Metal bars encased the glass. But the grate was old and was separating from the building. Jerking quickly, I was able to break the entire metal grate from the sill, then parted the curtains and entered the open window.

She watched from her bed, calmly. I was slightly startled that I'd never sensed her. I was growing lax, overusing my Extinguisher abilities to the point of not using common sense on my human side.

"You didn't scream," I said to her.

"The silver didn't turn."

I looked around the window. Naturally, the untouched years of silver was still stained a filthy black.

I sighed. "Have you visited with Mr. Millicotti?"

"No," she sulked. "He's crazy."

I raised my eyebrows at the irony.

"Well," she amended, "he's sleepy during the day. Wakes up a little more at night but then I'm sleepy. And he's not Mr. Millicotti, he's Father."

That's right. A priest.

"You're not here to ask me more of those mean questions, are you?"

"Virginia, I really need to know. If it wasn't important, I wouldn't ask you."

Her lips quivered and again she drew her knees up to her chest. Now I recognized the position as a defense mechanism. "I don't want to think about the dark place. I'll scream," she threatened.

"Who are you gonna scream for, Mum?" I asked, my voice dangerously soft. Faint awareness flicked in her eyes.

"There's something wrong with your pupils," she said, wringing her hands agitatedly.

I shrugged off my abnormality. My eyes were permanently dilated and would be forever. "I wear sunglasses a lot. See, you don't want to think about the dark place but I live in the dark place. Now, tell me about a monster named Ramon."

She knew. I could tell by the widening of her eyes, the instant look of terror on her face.

"Let's start slowly. Just tell me what he looked like so I can make sure it's the same one."

Her gaze strayed to the window, to the silver hung around the frame.

"If it's any consolation, the one I know is dead now. He's been dead for over ten years."

She was silent for a long time, with just the faint rasping of her breathing. Then, her voice was a whisper. "Are you sure?" she asked.

"Very much. Describe him for me."

She stared off into space as she searched her memory. Her eyes looked past me as if I were no longer present and her voice grew monotonous. "He was tall. His skin color was odd, a pasty kind of white. Not pink, like a redhead or albino. But a pale yellowish shade. Like an earthworm. He had dark eyes but even the whites were a little yellow. A little bit of a mustache. His body was big, not just tall."

It could have been the same man. Of course, when I had seen him last, he was as thin as a rail.

"Did he have any scars?"

"I...I don't know," she said, hugging her legs against her chest. "I can't remember!"

"It's okay," I soothed. "What else can you remember? Was he handsome?"

"He was evil inside and that took away any beauty. Do you know what I mean? Like the kid who enjoys pulling the wings off bugs."

"But if you didn't know he was evil, he'd be handsome?"

Her eyes stared vacantly again as she tried to recall his face. "I think so. But I can't see the beauty because he's so mean inside. Vicious. I know, he reminds me of a bully.



The kind who fights with others while his parents pretend their child does nothing wrong. Then he grows to slaughter those same parents. His own."

Slaughter. That was an interesting word.

"How did you meet him?"

"I don't know!" she said, her voice panicked.

I remembered the scarring of her breast.

"Did he like to burn things?"

That question might have pushed her over the top. She inhaled sharply. Then began to sing as she rocked her body frantically back and forth.

"If pulling and pinching and twisting don't mark, strike a match while a person's tied up in the dark. La, la, la."

She covered her ears with her hands, pressing tightly. "Go away, go away, go away."

Footsteps thumped in the hallway and I stepped quickly behind the door before it was pushed open.

Virginia still rocked frantically, her hands over her ears.

"Doctor!" a voice called. "She's having another episode."

Another sound of running footsteps. "Haldol! Five milligrams."

"Stop it! Stop it! Stop it!" Virginia screamed, her eyes clenched, her ears covered. Behind the door, I waited and listened to the scuffling noises.

Gradually, her voice died away as the drugs spread into her system.

The nurses spoke between themselves. "What is going on today? First that commotion downstairs, now this."

"It was some crazy vamp down there who just ran off. It probably triggered some memory in poor crazy little Virginia. No big deal."

That would be easy enough for them to believe. I slid out from behind the door while they were distracted by lifting her deadened body to haul her over to the bed. Her drug-zoned eyes caught me, connected with mine and looked away. I slipped down the hallway.

A shiver ran down my spine. She'd protected me.

The Reis women had endured more than their fair share of torture.

I had one last chore to do. Hospital personnel were slowly starting to thread their way back through the corridors. I had to duck twice to get back over to the hallway I remembered. I slipped back into Room 403.

Joseph Millicotti was still half staring in his drugged state, between wake and sleep. I grabbed his chart, looking down the line of medications. I couldn't erase them, it would alert the staff who counted out his daily meds.

But I could add something. I remembered a drug from the lab that was being used in experiments. Naloxone's original purpose was to reverse the effects of calming drugs,

aka narcotics. On us, it was mixed with other experimental stimulants and used without narcs to push us farther.

He would be more lucid right after it was injected. A very mild dose on a man with years of narcotic built up in his system...

My brain was going a mile a minute. There were so many ifs—I could easily kill him if I wasn't careful. But then again, perhaps even death would be a blessing compared to the decades of what he'd already faced.

Besides, my mother needed him. It was necessary to try.

I wrote it down for the breakfast and lunch injections. At the dinner meds, he would zone again but it would be a good night's sleep for him. He would slowly get back to a more normal schedule. Hopefully, the overworked staff wouldn't have the time or energy to wonder why his narcotics were balanced with a reversing agent.

I slipped his chart back into the holder on the wall before I leapt from the balcony, walking quickly around the facility to where we'd left the car.

Ethan was standing next to it. Out in the sun, he looked like an everyday human. Just pale. He could stand the sun if he wasn't injured but he wasn't as strong as he normally was because of the sun's draining abilities. On the other hand, neither was he a new vampire who couldn't yet adapt to the change of life between human and infection. Still, I hurried. The sun wasn't good for him and it was my fault he was in it.

"What did you learn from your mother?" he called out, holding open the car door for me.

I never broke my stride. "Nothing. She's insane."

## Chapter Nine

Contrary to what I'd told Ethan, I had learned something. I'd learned that my original hatred of vampires was born from fear. Not my own but my mother's. It had been instilled early, in my developing childhood. A critical formation period for mental growth. But how could I share such a prejudice with him?

I'd been with her until I was three, when the government had taken me. But back then, there was a lot of red tape to go through before the Academy of Extinguishers finally got their way. She still had legal visitations for quite a while, in fact, I was bounced back and forth between her home and the government for a few years.

One judge decided that was too stressful for a child. While the legal hassles were underway, I was sent to live in a catholic orphanage. One solitary nun taught me my humanity, though I'd spent more years with men trying to make me forget those early lessons. The government had thought ahead to keeping me permanently by committing my mother, knowing there was no one else to want her bizarre child.

When it was all said and done, the judge had no choice but to return me to the Academy.

I didn't remember that fear, for I'd never seen a vampire. But it was triggered over my first encounter with the one I'd killed at thirteen. The one who taunted me about my gene pool.

I believed his full name had been Ramon Durant.

Although, in a way I should be grateful. He was the one to instill upon me the need to search into my government records. To search and destroy the hidden files kept by one solitary man, as detailed as a personal diary.

Dr. Fokusovich.

I parked the car but instead of heading up the staircase to my apartment, Ethan took my hand and we headed to the lush green yard around the building. "Come, let's relax. Let it all go before we bring the tension inside."

I wasn't aware I was tense. But I let him lead me because his hand was warm and large and comforting.

We settled on the soft grass, against a tree, the scent of orange blossoms wafting in the air. Sitting behind me, Ethan wrapped his arms around me while I leaned back against his chest. "Do you remember our first time, *bella*?"

"Why do you think of it? I almost killed you," I murmured.

He traced a finger down my bare arm. "Here we both are. Alive and well. I know it's hard but it's meant to be."

"It is hard," I agreed. "I barely trust you and you're asking me to trust your vampire tribe enough to live with you."

He pressed a kiss to my shoulder. "Yes. Just as I ask them to trust you. It is just as hard for them, you've killed many of my kind."

"Another reason why we cannot coexist, Ethan."

"I'm the connecting reason. And you are the only Extinguisher I would ever expose my family to."

"I'm not different from the rest." I hated the guilty tone in my voice, for I knew good and well I was different from other Extinguishers somehow, in a way I refused to face. For one, it was exceptionally difficult to experiment on me, a lot of medications neutralized in my bloodstream, rendering them useless. Each experiment turned into a puzzle, causing further delay because then the scientists had to stop and figure out what caused that effect before they could get back to the original experiment. And unfortunately for them, anything they changed couldn't be reversed to an earlier point, like the simple procedure of drawing and testing blood. For my blood couldn't be frozen. It died within minutes of leaving my body, to the frustrations of the Russian doctors.

During later years, they wanted to clone me. My cells died.

Someone got the bright idea to breed me.

That was a fight in which I'd almost allowed them to witness what powers had grown inside me. I was extremely careful to keep many secrets from the doctors, especially since the killing of Morovich, along with the demented demon-vampire I'd slain.

All I knew is I wouldn't allow another child like me to go through the horrendous training facility. And that's what they wanted to create. Another me, but this time one they could control.

While I was at full strength, I wasn't at my full skill level. Eventually, I was overtaken by the guards and shackled onto a lab table. A familiar fate.

One medication that was broken down by my strangely immune blood was narcotics. Therefore, I had to endure experiments without anesthesia.

First, the drawing of my ripened eggs from my ovaries. Long, hollow needles injected deep into my highly sensitive female parts while I had the equivalent of tons of steel bands strapping down every inch of my body to keep me from bucking.

Most of the eggs died as soon as they left me. Others died when they were fertilized, as if incompatible with sperm. Further experimentation proved they even died if frozen, collapsing like dust upon the thaw.

Though not fertilized, one solitary egg somehow made it far enough to be injected into the uterus of a pig. I myself hoped it would live for a little while, for as long as it did, they wouldn't turn to me to draw more.

And it gave the doctors a false sense of glee over their success.

As soon as my exhausted mental fight was rested, I knew the egg had to die. As if linked to my mental impulses somehow, it did and the scientists cursed their luck as it vanished in the tissues of the pig.

Frustrated doctors haggled over reasons and solutions. When modern-day fixes wouldn't work, they always turned to primitive or natural methods.

Hence the pig uterus as opposed to a man-made incubator.

Dr. Trubachev, the assistant of Dr. Fokusovich, pointed out the success of the implantation of the pig-induced egg. He claimed it was due to returning to the basics. Therefore, he determined, breeding was best induced the old-fashioned way. I was enslaved to a solitary confinement with another Extinguisher. An Original, so we would "have something in common". As if a courtship was possible in the sterile laboratory environment.

What they didn't realize was HB-8 Hartley was a male pumped full of testosterone by the doctors. He had to win at all costs and since I was a better experiment than him, he was eaten alive with jealousy.

Hardly an amorous mood setting.

When two months of being cooped up with my hated enemy went by, along with two of my female cycles, it was decided the week before ovulation, when I was prone to "mating cycles", I would be injected with a female aphrodisiac. Yohimbine. Along with the usual basic female stimulants like estrogen to encourage the ripening of more eggs.

To the glee of the doctors, Yohimbine was not broken down by my blood upon contact. For once, they didn't care about determining the reason why, though I suspected it was because it was a natural ingredient and not chemically man-made.

But to add to my hatred toward them, a side effect was permanent dilation of my pupils. A constant reminder, each time I looked in the mirror. I now had to forever wear black sunglasses outside, adding to their marketed "Extinguisher" look.

And as I said, Yohimbine worked. My tested levels were sky-high. The doctors knew. I couldn't hide it from them. Somehow I had to twist the results to suit me, to keep them from achieving their purpose. I did the only thing I knew how.

Being cooped up with Hartley meant I had to release my pent-up frustrations somehow. So I kicked his ass.

He was nearly dead before panic alarms began to sound, signifying the scientists watched from cameras posted in solitary confinement. And Hartley was an important Extinguisher, another of the Originals who had survived this long. Too important to let die without purpose.

All locked gates opened, releasing five armed guards. The battle was on, for I found a way to release my drug-heightened sexual tension. In the past, I'd fought for survival. Now it was a fight to the death, for I wouldn't be bred.

Two guards headed straight for Hartley. Three headed for me.

The first guard made the mistake of looking me up and down, as if I were a piece of meat. I grew cold when I realized word had spread about this latest experiment and I was suddenly interesting.

He reached for me. I grabbed his wrist and spun under his arm, moving behind him and bringing the arm up behind his back. Normally, one would stop at this point, until the one trapped agreed to your demands.

However, my demands were *to hear bones pop*.

Mercilessly, I twisted his arm until it broke and he screamed. I grabbed his other one.

"Never reach for me again. If you so much as ever look at me, I'll pop your eyeballs out. Got it?"

He nodded and I tightened my grip on his arm. Then I cracked it in half anyway. He wouldn't be able to shoot.

Another guard came at me but I dropped and rolled, striking out a kick to his groin. When he fell, I noted another guard moving in too close for comfort. Grabbing the knife from the fallen guard who held onto his ruptured testicles, I swung it over the back of his ankles, severing his Achilles tendons.

He flopped like a fish, blocking the path of the guard who approached. The latest guard stumbled and fell, staring in horror at the spread of blood from the ankles of his partner. Calmly, I took the gun from his belt, set it to medium stun and zapped him.

His body twitched, wet from the blood on the floor. It intensified the electricity from the laser gun, paralyzing him instantly.

The three guards who'd entered mere seconds before hadn't been much of a fight. Not even close to the fight I'd enjoyed with Hartley, another Extinguisher and therefore more up to my strength. The humans were weak by comparison.

I watched all three writhe on the floor, wondering when they'd send the next batch in.

The overhead loudspeakers came on.

"Afton! We need to you stop. To take control. We cannot have you exterminating guards."

"Then let me have Hartley," I called out. His broken body had been taken away on a stretcher by the first two guards.

"We need HB-8. You cannot destroy him."

"Then I'll destroy them." I motioned around the room at the groaning guards. "I'll twist their necks, one by one." I moved to the paralyzed one.

"Afton! Stop. We have a compromise. We know your rage is caused by the drug flowing through your veins, it's not quite the effect we wanted. But we're willing to make amends."

Of course it wasn't the effect they wanted. They wanted me to lose all control and fuck Hartley's brains out.

Well, they got the first half of what they wanted. I was out of control.

The voice over the loudspeaker conveyed urgency. "Afton, we have word on where a hidden vampire tribe is. A dance club downtown, called *The Ravine*. You can release your rage with the monsters you were trained to search and destroy."

I paused, my grip on the jaws of the helmeted guard, where the idea had occurred to snap his neck.

"Look, the doors are open. Gates are raised. If you kill that guard, you'll be tried for murder. Go release your steam and find your way back to the lab when you're done."

My hands shook on the jaws of the terrified guard, aching to do the deed. That statement infuriated me in my already heightened rage. They were so positive I'd return.

And I would. They had made sure I had nowhere else to go.

Still, I got to see the outside world. On my own. This would be another turning point for me. They didn't know it but I would always hunt alone from now on.

I'd met Ethan and other vampires before, of course. I'd hunted him—stalked him—for years at this point. Injuring him many, many times.

As soon as I found him and similar to countless other times, his other vamps showed up for the fight. To die themselves, if necessary, to protect the leader.

I had entered the club full of squirming, sweaty bodies. Amid the loud music and frenzy, I sensed him. The one individual I sought. Yet, I wasn't quite sure what I wanted. Violence, yes. But something more brewed within me with this particular vampire.

I watched covertly until I noticed when couples began to disappear. The next set, I followed.

The giggling, drunken female was led down a narrow concrete staircase in the back and through a set of drapes. I couldn't morph somewhere I'd never been but I wasn't afraid to enter, for it would be easy enough to morph out at that point.

Underground, it was vampire quarters. All I had to do was find the one male I'd scented. The leader, the original vampire. I waited until the male and female entered another room, closing the door with a click. Oddly enough, my eyesight was extraordinary, even through the darkened glasses. Extinguishers were provided to protect their eyes from the spray of body fluids. I'd never before had a problem with the glasses and like most people, always took them off when indoors.

But this one time, I never bothered to remove the lenses from my face. I entered a large room and felt excitement. This was it, I could feel him nearby as easily as if he breathed onto my skin.

He was ready for me.

I never paused. I struck with a series of punches that he blocked easily, although I may have seen him wince. I cornered him with an arm to his throat but he flung me off.

I hit against the wall, bouncing back to return to him, my adrenaline so high I hardly felt it. He kicked me away and the door swung open to other vampires of his nest.

But this time was unusual. Breathing heavily, Ethan still spoke commandingly. "Leave us."

Incredulous gazes focused on him.

"Are you mad?" one asked.

"There's something different with this fight. I need the rest of you to flee, I will find you later."

Saving the clan? I raised my eyebrows. "You take a lot for granted that you'll live, vampire," I spat.

My statement caused his men to hesitate. Ethan never took his eyes from me, but he locked into a fight stance at the same time as he bellowed to them. "Go!"

There was only a slight pause before they disappeared. It didn't matter to me, I would extinguish the leader. It was a coup greater than the quantity of death. It was the quality of the fight. The Original monster who had spread the infection among the rest would be mine.

For now, I turned my attention to the confrontation in front of me. Staring into his eyes, I bent my arms at the elbows in a common sparring stance, a deliberate challenge.

"What are you after, Extinguisher?" he said.

I struck out, a toying jab right across his face. It whipped his head around and my head snapped back when he returned the favor.

I kicked out, connecting with solid chest, lined with muscle. He grabbed my foot and tossed me into the air over the bed but not before I kicked out with my other across his own ankles, flipping him over.

He landed directly on top of me, a tiny bit of blood in the corner of his mouth. My sunglasses were flung from my face in the skirmish. His hands held mine above my head, where the headboard was. Shock held us still for a brief moment. His next statement held me still for longer.

"What's wrong with you?"

I was slightly confused, which I was sure he meant to do.

I broke his hold on me, but instead of letting me hit, he grabbed my wrists again. Something different in his voice held me still.

"What is different with your eyes?"

I could only look at him, puzzled.

"They've done something to you. Your pupils are hugely dilated."

Was the monster trying to distract me?

"What do you speak of, creature?"

"You're not even behaving as yourself. Your mannerisms are different."

Was I really having a conversation with the one I was to kill?



"Focus, Afton," he continued. "Yes, you kill vampires. But is this truly your will?"

I thought about the Yohimbine injected into me.

"Yes, they have done something, haven't they? What is it, Extinguisher? A drug? Your reactions are slightly slower than usual, but stronger also."

I must have been coming down from the effects to answer the monster on top of me, because I nodded.

"So this isn't you —"

"Of course it is," I spat. "I hunt the monsters, just as I always have. I hunt you and those like you. I'll exterminate your entire race."

"Perhaps," he agreed and I was thrown for a loop.

It was then that I noticed his body. Lean and hard and tightly pressed against mine.

"Your eyes just dilated farther, if that's possible," he said and dropped his gaze to my lips. I licked them slowly, wetting them while he watched. Leisurely. Testing out my never-before-uncovered wiles.

The look on his face was worth the experiment. It filled with a need I'd never noticed. An urgent need I was ready to explore with my newly heightened, drug-induced, senses.

His eyelids seemed to grow heavy. We were breathing hard, never more aware of the differences between us. His hardness, pressing against my soft flesh. The size of his body, completely covering mine.

I wanted nothing more than to release my suddenly aching breasts and feel them against his naked chest.

I wanted him to free my hands so I could explore the hard muscles of his back.

I wanted to wrap my legs around him and never let go while he sated the need inside me.

He knew I was ready and willing. He lowered his head to mine and touched deftly. His tongue flicked out to my lips, licking and exploring. I opened mine and he ground his mouth to me. He tasted every inch of my essence and our breathing grew harsh, as if we fueled each other's need.

All I knew at that moment was, I liked kissing. But there was more, I felt it. I yearned for it. I wanted it now.

I looked into his eyes, searching for answers there, as if I could reach his mind.

But the Yohimbine. What if I hurt him, as easily as I'd hurt HB-8?

"I'll handcuff you," he whispered, as if I'd spoken out loud. "Just like this, your hands safely above your head."

"Don't invade my mind." I detested the vampire tricks and usually could block him but with the drug flowing through me, I wasn't quite as able. I'd felt his presence as he poked around though, wondering what emotions I felt. He knew about the uncontrollable desire.

Never removing his weight from me, he stretched one arm out to a nightstand drawer, removing handcuffs.

"Bring your wrists up to the bars of the headboard."

"One hand." For how would I feel the warm skin beneath his clothing if they were both tied? And how did I trust the bastard?

"Your dominant hand then," he agreed and the bargain was struck. I raised my right arm to the thickest bar of the headboard and he locked me to it with a rasp followed by a click.

I wasn't afraid. I could still kill one-handedly. He was probably arrogant himself, thinking if I was single-handed he could take me on.

We were in a delicate balance of mistrust.

But he had both his hands free.

I felt his fingers at the edge of my waist, pressing against my belly. They skimmed lightly across my midsection before he brought the tight elastic of my uniform hem up over the globes of my breasts.

In the span of an instant, my wish had come true. My aching breasts had been released.

And exposed to his view.

"My God," he muttered. "You are more beautiful than I imagined...creamy skin, topped with perfection."

He bent his head, sucking my nipple into the warmth of his mouth. I gasped at the wondrous sensations that pulled from deep inside me. With each suck of his mouth, wet warmth gathered between my legs, making me squirm desperately.

He dropped my hand so that he could rub the sensitive area through my black pants. He might as well have rubbed bare skin for all the barrier my skintight pants provided.

"You're wet through your pants," he said in a voice that was huskier than usual. He turned his attention to my other breast.

I brought my free hand down to feel him. I ran it over his biceps, feeling the bulge beneath my fingers. It was so hard, so tight. So male.

The hand he had between my legs was driving me crazy, insistently rubbing against a magic spot. He released my breast and I used my free hand to cup the back of his head, pulling him back up to my lips.

He opened his mouth to me, inserting his tongue as if he meant to taste every inch of me.

"Lift your hips," he said against my mouth. My pants were tugged down past my thighs. A wet finger plunged into me. No, not a wet finger. A finger made instantly wet from my own juices. He thrust it inside and I clenched my muscles around it, my tongue still dueling with his.

It was wickedly delightful.

He pulled his hand out and I heard the unsnapping sound of his jeans before something hard and thick and wonderful prodded against my swollen flesh. Much as I wanted to, I couldn't spread my legs to force him into me. My pants were still a barrier keeping my legs together at the knees. He maneuvered one hard thigh between mine just enough to slide into me with one stroke.

Such a tight fit. I closed my eyes briefly. It felt so amazingly good, there was no way to describe it. I couldn't move, could only rotate my hips in circular motions as I clenched my internal muscles around his cock.

There was a race to a finish line I didn't understand. I fought to find it, twisting and bucking against him clumsily while I sucked his tongue eagerly.

He groaned.

The thought that I could make this vampire groan was empowering. I went wild, grinding against him as best I could, every now and then my swollen clitoris bumping against something hard and wonderful...

Heat invaded me and I paused. It was a rush of fluid flooding me, infusing my sheath with hot liquid. *That* was what his groan meant.

I could bring this vampire to lose control.

*That* was sexy.

Just the thought of his body gushing into mine triggered a series of explosions from the area of heat to radiate through me. I gasped.

This was it. This was the unknown I strived for. Lights exploding, starbursts, heart-pounding release.

I stared at the ceiling, wondering at it all.

He lifted his head from the crook of my neck and slowly brought his lips to mine. This kiss was different from the demand from before. Gentle now. Tender.

His lips were soft. A slight smile curved my mouth as I welcomed his touch. I felt different, wondrous. Satisfied and fulfilled. Amazed at this experience we'd just shared. Wondering when we could share it again. And again.

We kissed for long moments and I didn't want to stop. Desire sparked again as he slanted his mouth over mine. Again and again, our tongues met, licking, tasting, giving and seeking pleasure. It never occurred to me that the kissing might come to an end.

"Ethan? Where is everyone?" a feminine voice called moments before opening the door. "Oh, my God."

"Get out of here, Ariana." His voice was harsh but it was too late.

"I thought you loved me!" she sobbed, slamming the door with a loud bang.

She was human. She couldn't be anything else, to be left behind when all the others had gone.

There were two punctures in her neck. A new emotion flooded my senses. Jealousy. I hated her instantly.

"So your vampire clan left, per your instructions, but left behind your human floozy?"

"She does not travel with my tribe."

"Get off me, you bastard."

He rose from me, grabbing clothes. I pulled my top back down over my breasts with my one hand and hurriedly struggled to pull my panties and pants up with the same one.

"Take this off," I demanded, jerking the handcuff harshly.

"Calm down," he started.

"Now!" But he wasn't moving fast enough and I wrenched my hand from the metal link, scraping flesh and dislocating a thumb in my haste to pull away.

He winced. "Stop it, Afton. There's no need to hurt yourself, I would have unlocked you."

"I need no favors from you."

"I do believe I just did you a favor."

Son of a bitch. A red haze covered my world. How could I be so stupid?

"Let's talk this over, *bella*."

That was the start of a nickname that would continue throughout the years, even when we fought.

"I cannot. You're a monster."

"You are still a brainwashed child."

"Brainwashed child? Tell me you don't bend that woman's will? Ariana? To allow you to feed from her neck?"

The hint of red at his cheekbones was the giveaway.

"She is nothing to me."

"Quite the gentleman, aren't you?" I sneered. "Kiss and tell, do you?"

"What of you, *bella*? Will you kiss and tell about us?"

I snapped the leather waistband of my pants. "Never. I'd just as soon forget about it."

## Chapter Ten

"Afton? What has you distracted, my love?"

We were supposed to be enjoying the sunset together and I blushed guiltily at my naughty memories.

"Our first time."

He inhaled deeply. "Ahh, yes. I was so aroused, I spilled like a schoolboy."

"I had no complaints," I laughed. "I enjoyed it thoroughly."

"But I would have gone again, had we not been interrupted by Ariana."

I shrugged. "I figured you'd returned to her when I left."

His breath was warm on my neck. "No. She was not my lover."

"Then what was her purpose?"

"She was my blood donor. Of course she wanted more, but my interests always lay with you. You were my constant distraction."

"I accused you of bending her will to allow you to feed."

"There was no need. She was willing, but expected much more. I had to get rid of her after she caught us together, though. Her jealousy was tangible. She wanted what you so carelessly tossed away."

"I didn't trust you."

"Are you ready to explore why?"

I sighed. It was a beautiful day, the grass green and soft where we sat. The arms of my lover around me. I didn't want to ruin the perfection. This time, maybe I wouldn't let him go. Maybe I wouldn't drive him away.

He continued on. "It goes beyond the training the Academy gave you of Search and Destroy. You had an inborn hatred."

"Yes."

"Where did it come from, *bella*?"

"I just figured that one out. It comes from my mother."

"I thought you learned nothing from her? That she was insane?"

"She is insane. I realize my hatred stems from her fear."

"And what is your greatest fear now, my love?"

I paused. Remained silent for long moments. "You know my greatest fear, Ethan."

"Yet that isn't the whole truth. Something is missing from the equation. Why are you so afraid to die, *bella*?"

"I... I can't go there. Not yet." The silence after my statement was thick. Was he disappointed in me? I twisted in his arms, looping my arms around his neck. "I'm sorry."

"Do not be. Baby steps, Afton. One day at a time."

His forehead lowered to mine. A brief beeping sound interrupted our moment. He pulled away to fish a flat cell from his pocket.

"Yes?"

The voice on the other end was clear. "Ethan, this is Reese. We've finally got a lead on the woman."

"You have found her? She is still alive? You have her now?"

"We've found her. She is alive, we do not have her as yet. We shall capture tonight. Do you have Afton? Are you able to return?"

"Yes, I am with her. We'll be en route tomorrow."

He closed the cell shut with a snap.

"Who have they captured?" I asked.

"A woman we have hunted for many years. I almost believed her to be dead."

"Who is she?"

"Human. She'd been captured by a vampire years ago. She needs intensive healing."

Something clicked at that moment. A warmth, radiating heat to areas that had been relatively frozen until now. "You seek out one human being to help at the risk of your own capture?"

"Do you realize you would have once assumed we would capture a human to harm? You didn't express that this time."

"You're right. Somewhere, I stopped assuming."

"It's about time, my love. Come, let's get inside."

We rose from the grass and he leaned down to kiss my nose. "I will find a way to make this work, *bella*."

"I know."

Faint surprise shone in his eyes. "Faith in me at last?"

"Maybe, sweetheart," I grinned. "As long as you don't get too cocky, making tornadoes and such."

He took my hand and we walked across the lawn. Suddenly Ethan spun me to face him with his superhuman speed. I caught a wave of dizziness before he grabbed me to morph onto my balcony.

"Warn me before you do that," I muttered.

His lips twitched. "You have the ability to morph as a vampire and yet you complain of the dizziness?"

It took getting into the apartment to make me realize this was as normal as life got for us. This was what I always feared, always fought against. Being alone with Ethan. Being dependent on Ethan. Just sharing my life with Ethan.

Yet somehow, I'd slowly adapted to where I wasn't even aware of the gradual change.

"We will need to turn in early, *bella*. I need to shut down to build my strength for tomorrow's healing of the human. We'll leave at dawn."

I nodded.

"Let's feed you. I'd hate to be stuck with a starving Extinguisher."

I smiled. "Worse yet to be stuck with a starving vamp." I headed to the fridge. Pulling out a steak, I sprinkled seasoning on it and heated my broiler. Ethan grabbed a potato and scrubbed it clean.

I put the steak under the broiler and popped the potato into the microwave. When the buzzer sounded, I pulled the lukewarm meat from the broiler.

I took my meat rare.

Sitting across the counter from him, I proceeded to eat, waiting for his questions, which I knew would come. He was content to watch me for a while.

"*Bella*, is your meat even warm?"

"Humor can never be too dry, sweetie. While steak can be."

"It's bloody enough for a vamp."

I tried not to allow my fork to pause. I bit the meat from the tines, chewing slowly.

Wondering why he made that comment. I didn't require blood. But I craved something in it.

"What do you remember of your childhood? You can skip the painful parts. Is there any happiness you can remember?"

"Of course," I said. "I can remember being sent to the Catholic church while the legal battles were underway. That was a time in my life when I had a real family."

"With the way your luck runs, I'd expect the old church nuns would have used you as slave labor."

I laughed. "No, they weren't old mean nuns. One was beautiful. Sister Emily. Kind and gentle. She taught me prayer."

"When was the last time you prayed?"

"I don't remember." I picked up my plate and headed into the kitchen. We washed the few dishes, side by side. A very comfortable, easygoing feeling rose over me.

I turned to him. "This is very domestic. And it wasn't so hard, was it?"

"No. Tell me about Sister Emily. What was she like?"

"I don't remember a whole lot anymore. She had red hair, but the patience of a saint. She would merely cross herself when I was naughty, instead of yelling like most would be prone to."

"You were naughty a lot."

"So some said."

He snorted. "You were hellfire by the time I'd met you. I'm surprised you aren't a redhead yourself."

"That was one of the things I prayed for. Every day I would check the mirror to see if my dark hair magically turned red."

"I can't see a child praying for red hair."

"Oh, it was easy. I still remember how it went, Mirror, Mirror, on the wall. Grace me with the hair of fall."

Ethan looked shocked. "That was your prayer? You were incorrigible."

"Puh-lease. I've seen your temper tantrums, baby."

"You are the only one who upsets me. As a child, I was very near perfect."

I raised my eyebrows at that one.

"Are you ready to turn in?" he said, his voice gruff.

I nodded, wondering at the change. His hand tucked a stray lock of hair behind my ear, shaking ever so slightly.

Ethan was nervous.

The calm, headstrong leader of the vamps was thrown for a loop by a human emotion. I wanted to give him peace of mind. "I'm glad you're here, Ethan." I pulled him to me, tucking my head into the crook of his neck, where I buried my nose to breathe deeply of his scent.

He lifted me, carrying me into the bedroom where he let me stand at the foot of the bed. He stripped off his shirt while I pulled the bedcovers down.

I undressed, then slid in between the sheets where he met me from the other side. He wrapped me into his arms and I felt the tension instantly relax from my body.

It was my favorite place in the world. His arms.

Did I dare get used to this?

\* \* \* \* \*

He was up and gone before I ever stirred. The scent of rich coffee permeated the air. I stretched lazily.

"It's about time." He entered the room with a steaming mug.

"Heaven," I said, taking it gratefully.

He smiled, watching as I sipped. "You have five minutes to shower, or I'll join you. And that will make us late."

"Time for that after we save your human then, big boy," I said as I took my coffee into the bathroom. I showered and dressed in record time and we made it to his car



before the sun broke dawn. Most of the drive was done in silence until Ethan finally spoke.

"You look better today."

"I wasn't aware I looked bad."

He gave me a glance from the corner of his eye. "Not bad. But you were looking a little peaked yesterday. Pale. Apparently you needed that red meat you had for dinner."

"Perhaps I'm anemic," I countered lightly. Always, he wanted to return to the conversations I tried to avoid.

I wasn't sure why I craved my meat so rare but it couldn't be a good thing.

His cell beeped, interrupting our conversation. "Yes?" Ethan said.

Reese's voice was clear as a bell. "Are you close?"

"We're nearly there."

"It's going to take more than our power, Ethan. We can't heal her until you arrive."

"Is she that bad?"

"Worse. Much worse. It's been way too many years. I'll wait 'til you get here to see for yourself."

Ethan snapped the cell shut, then stepped on the accelerator. "Damn, I wish we could morph. But we've moved to another cave and you haven't yet been there."

"Are you able to morph us together?"

"Not with this great a distance. I hope the human can hang on."

The rest of the drive was made with quick, jerky movements of the gas and heavy pulling on the steering wheel, which showed his concern for the waiting human. When we finally arrived at the forlorn location, Ethan moved like a blur to my side of the car, opening the door and rushing me inside.

It was a pathetic, dirty creature squatting in the corner of the cave. She was thin and milk-white, with dull red hair streaked through with gray. The scarring of burn tissue covered half her naked body. She was past the point of screaming, her throat raw and her voice nonexistent.

My heart slammed in my chest. I clenched my suddenly damp palms, unaware of anything but the need to reach her without frightening her further.

"Mum."

I collapsed to my knees, crawling to her as best I could with the sudden hot rush of tears that poured down my face, obscuring my vision.

Not her.

## Chapter Eleven

She was lost deep in the dark, twisted trails of her mind, trying as hard as she could to blend with the walls of the cave. She was too frail to be this frightened – she could die from the shock.

I wrung my hands, wondering what to do. Trying to resist from reaching out and scaring her further.

“Virginia Reis is your mother?” I was scarcely aware of the incredulous tone to Ethan’s voice, my attention was on the panicked sounds of the heart-wrenching sobs emanating from the redhead.

She turned to look at me. “My dolly,” she sobbed. “Did you trick me? The silver didn’t stop them.”

The rush of an old memory hit me. My hair being braided as a child. Tiny braids, twisting all over my head. She’d never meant the Barbie at all. She’d meant me.

“The silver was for the evil ones, remember?” I pacified. “These ones are not.”

“All the blood-sucking monsters are evil!” Though she shrieked, her exhausted voice had no volume, cracking and breaking painfully.

I kept mine passive. “No. Just the one who had you was bad.”

“Stop, stop, stop,” she screamed, rocking on her heels.

The hot burn of tears stung my eyes as a fresh wave threatened to overflow and spill. I turned to Reese. “Where’s her meds?”

He didn’t answer and I yelled. “Didn’t you kidnap her with her goddamn medication, Reese?” I rose to my feet, intent on raising bloody hell.

Ethan’s hand circled my arm, pausing me in mid-stride. “Shh, *bella*. She doesn’t need drugs. Watch.”

He carefully invaded her mind. I could almost feel the link between them and watched as she gradually grew calm. Her eyelids fluttered and she slumped against the wall, as zoned as if she had been injected.

“Her body is as poisoned as her mind with all the narcotics they’ve used on her.” Ethan was clammy with the effort of calming the crazed woman.

“Why is she naked?” I whispered.

A feminine voice spoke hesitantly. “That’s my fault. I was going to take her to bathe when she woke from her drugs. But she went into a fit.”

I sat in front of her, cross-legged. Reaching out tentatively, I brushed a lock of reddish hair from her tearstained face, tucking it behind one ear.

A drop of sweat rolled down Ethan's temple, cutting a path as large as a trail of tears would. "I can't take her under fully. She's been this way for too long. She has to let herself slip under, to bend to my will. Only when she's unconscious can she heal."

"Let go, Mummy. Sleep," I whispered urgently.

But a vacant look stared me back.

"I've always known where you were," I shared. "I had to pretend I didn't know. And each time they moved you, I memorized where. I'd break into my files, they never suspected. I knew one day I'd go to find you. One day I'd help you. Even after they moved you when I retired and took my own files, I found you again."

Her voice was thick. "You did find me. Twice, dolly."

"But I couldn't take you. Couldn't care for you. Not by myself. You were sick. Now you're here and we have to get you well."

"They'll never make me well."

"Ethan can. You have to let him."

"No." Her eyes glazed again.

"*Bella*," Ethan said urgently, though his voice was tired. "You have to convince her. I can't hold on much longer and I'll never be able to access her mind again. The connections will be forever damaged."

How to reason with an insane woman? When short on time? I didn't know what to do and wanted to scream with frustration.

Suddenly it clicked.

Virginia Reis didn't just look familiar because she looked like a red-headed version of me. Sister Emily had been a redhead too. Everything rang clear as a bell.

"Mum. Did you have a sister?"

She stared past me.

I called out, my voice sharp. "Virginia Reis. Do you have a sister?"

"Sister Afton. Mother Theresa. Sister Virginia. Sister...Emily," she whispered.

"Son of a bitch," I muttered. Sister Emily was Virginia's real sister. That was why she had been so good to me. Maybe even Virginia had been in a nunnery before Ramon had gotten a hold of her. But now, I knew how to get through to her.

I whispered, so slowly. "Now I lay me..."

Her eyes darted quickly toward me.

"Down to sleep..."

She kept eye contact, more alert than I'd seen her so far.

"I pray the Lord..."

One solitary tear ran down her dirty cheek. I wiped it away.

"My soul to keep."

"You look like Sister Emily," she whispered and closed her eyes.

"So do you," I whispered back but she was gone, lost in a trance.

Reese stepped in and covered her with a blanket before lifting her fragile body and carrying her away. I turned to Ethan.

He sat propped by a wall, eyes staring ahead sightlessly. Much like hers had been. I sat on his lap, wrapping my legs around him. He shivered with cold, trapped in the dark place of my mother's mind. I hugged him to me, enclosing him with my warmth. Someone brought me a blanket and draped it over my shoulders. I wrapped it around both of us and cradled my head into the crook of his neck.

He began to warm. I felt his pulse beating in the side of his neck and pressed my lips to it. His scent rose from his skin, slightly salty, very masculine. I loved this tantalizing spot. The very first time we made love I'd latched onto the tender area, marking it as mine. A sweet spot to remind him the next day of what had been.

Aware of another presence, I stilled. Waiting, I watched in my peripheral vision as Reese lowered himself to sit nearby. "How long will he be like this?" I asked quietly.

He shrugged. "Hours. Hard to tell, 'cause *she's* pretty bad. They're connected. It's rough for him to recoup here in the cave without amenities. But I couldn't take her into the city with her screaming and all."

The way he said amenities made me realize what he meant. Nutrition. Blood.

"Can he hear us?"

"I don't think so. He's too concentrated on Virginia Reis."

Suddenly, I was aware of whispers among the inhabitants of the cave. I couldn't make out the conversations, just tones.

"Virginia is your mother," Reese said thoughtfully.

"She is."

"Then the Academy knew what they were doing when they stole her child. She couldn't fight back."

"Apparently."

"You and Ethan have quite a bit in common. You had a tragedy with your mother just like him."

"What happened with his mother and sister?"

It took Reese a few moments to respond. "It was unheard of to strike down another vampire in those days. We were partners in survival, a war between us and the humans.

"Ethan's father was the leader. One day he just...disappeared, leaving his pregnant widow inconsolable. You see, Afton, when we disappear, there is no evidence left behind upon death. We implode, therefore there are no bones, no dust...no closure. Our bodies live so long while we breathe, that when we stop, it's as if the decades take their toll. But it takes a while, a few hours or so until the body realizes it is actually dead. Anyway, she couldn't face it and Ethan was torn. He was in line for leadership, he had

to protect his people, not only from the killing humans but now from a vampiric civil war. He had to leave his mother behind while he went to different tribes for training.

When he returned home his mother had remarried. Naturally, no one could stand the man, but he was one of us. Accepted. Ethan willingly left to keep the peace.

"But he shouldn't have, and will forever blame himself. When his baby sister turned up raped and beaten, he went after his stepfather. It was too late, however. His mother had gotten to him first, but at the last moment she was distracted by Ethan's force of power bursting into the cave to save her.

"She was beheaded in those split few seconds.

"His sister was unable to deal with her rape being the cause of her mother's death. She willingly met the sun, stabbing herself, hiding and bleeding for hours. Ethan rushed out to save her and was moments too late. She was in his arms when she exploded, unable to heal in the sunshine.

"Afterward was even worse. Two loved ones and he watched them both die. It was impossible for him to grieve for his loss, because it was his responsibility to sentence the vampire. Remember, this was an unheard of situation, no vampire had ever turned against another. We were unified in hiding from humans.

"Through it all, he had to remain stoic and unbiased to keep his position as vampire leader. Even when the vampire taunted him, bragging about how he had been the one to trick and kill Ethan's father to become the husband of his mother. How he'd enjoyed both mother and daughter."

"What made his mother marry him?"

"I think she just couldn't bear the loss of her husband, especially not while pregnant. She would have married anyone in that span of time, especially one as sly as him. None of us saw the evil within him, even when we found out later he had been capturing and torturing humans."

Capturing and torturing humans?

That hit too close to home.

"Ethan's been entranced for a long time. I need to get him comfortable. I wonder if I can morph him back to my apartment?"

"Highly doubtful. The only one strong enough to morph another is Ethan. But no offense to you, Extinguisher."

"It's true I've never morphed a person along with me," I said. "But Ethan has the ability too. I wonder if we can merge it together? But if Virginia wakes up, will she need me?"

"If I know Ethan, he won't let her wake until her mind is either as healed as her body, or wiped clean of all the horrors within it. But he'll need sleep. He deserves a comfortable place to suffer in while he absorbs her pain."

"If she needs someone, promise me you'll go back for Millicotti."

"The priest?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'll be damned. He was there in that same institution?"

Apparently he was another individual they sought.

I held on tight to Ethan, whispering into his ear. "I'm going to try to get us back, baby. You just relax, I'll take care of you."

I could almost swear I felt his arms tighten around me.

## Chapter Twelve

I stood in my kitchen, stirring a cup of tea. For the time being, Ethan slept.

While we called it sleep, it was more of a shutdown phase vampires did. They couldn't rouse easily, it was eerily like death.

It hadn't been easy to morph the two of us into my bed. He'd clenched his teeth with pain, even as he tried to shut down his body. Reese had instructed me to get him blood the moment he was able to rouse himself from his comatose state. I knew Reese expected me to allow Ethan to feed from me.

But I couldn't do that.

I had to leave the apartment and find neutral blood. I could never allow Ethan to taste my blood, there were too many uncertainties he could find. As much as I hated to leave him alone, it was necessary.

Perhaps I would be back before he even stirred.

Finishing my tea, I headed to the hall closet. A small knife with an ivory handle was slipped into the strap on my upper thigh. I grabbed a backpack, loaded it with more weapons and swung it over my back. With one final look at my unconscious lover, I slipped out the balcony doors and jumped from the roof.

The ground rose to meet me as if in slow motion. I hit the spongy lawn with a faint thud. Rising from my protective crouch, I headed north.

When I reached my destination, it was as I expected. Locked shop, lights out, void of staff, except for the protective personnel.

Human police. They were a fat, lazy breed. A waste of mankind.

Yet, there had been a time when police were respected and useful, but training in intimidation tactics led to corruption and had changed all of that. They got to the point of where they didn't have to answer to anyone. They felt they were the law. It was discrimination to fire an officer for his weight, so society looked the other way when donuts and other free tidbits became standard offerings to avoid harassment.

Once Extinguishers were introduced to society, human police became useless, lazy bureaucrats. Big, swollen heads on ego trips, filled with their self-inflicted power, yet amazingly inept. They relied on their weapons—strip those from them and they were a waste of oxygen.

There wouldn't be much fight practice here.

I blended into the branches of a tree while the uniformed officer paused his leisurely walk around the building. He crackled into the speaker attached to his shoulder and rocked back on his heels, surveying the area.

I surveyed it also. The other person on that speaker was somewhere in the vicinity. That would make at least two of them.

A woman approached, out with her dog. "Officer, how are you?"

"Fine, ma'am."

"I wondered if I could talk to you for just a minute? My brother is a policeman. How is Chief Thompson?"

Their voices faded away for me. But I could tell exactly when the officer became flattered by whatever the woman said. He literally preened, sucking air into his lungs to expand his chest, like a peacock strutting before a mirror.

I slipped toward the building where an electrical box was centered. Engineering never failed to amaze me.

A flip of the breaker shut off the alarms. Since the lights were already turned off inside, there was no hint of a loss of power. Shifting a few feet down to a window, I pulled a thin blade and popped the molding. I returned the ultra-thin weapon to the strap on my inner thigh.

It was almost too long. It could injure me should I climb carelessly through the window.

Carefully I slid the glass from the broken rubberized seal and set it inside the room.

I would hate for the moon to shine and cast a reflection onto the glass, signaling the idiot cop's attention.

Pulling myself up, I somersaulted into the window. I didn't have to bend my knees that way and my knife sat a little too low for comfort. The last thing I needed was to drip a trail of blood behind me like a gruesome version of Hansel and Gretel.

It was too quiet. I was used to Extinguishers jumping out from every angle. There was no threat here at all.

For the first time in my life, I had too many weapons.

I unzipped my insulated backpack and made new spots on my body to store the weapons. My boot, the back of my pants, a strap on my arm. When the bag was empty, I headed to the steel doors of the refrigerators.

I'd have to remember to return the power when I left.

I rummaged through the bags of blood stored there, finding an excess of O Negative. Naturally, being the universal blood type.

It ought to be tasty enough. And ironically, it was my own typing.

I stuffed as many bags into my backpack as I could and zippered it shut. Quietly, I slipped from the fridge, shutting it softly with a dull click.

Another dull click echoed right behind my ear.

"Well, well, pretty thing. What have we here?"



The breath stank behind me. The officer'd had garlic for lunch. He must have been inside the entire time, or I would have sensed when he'd entered. But still, if nothing else I should have smelled his breath.

"You have no idea what you have."

"I want you to spread your legs and place your hands flat against the wall."

"You really should just walk away."

"Are you kidding me? I have you on a breaking and entering charge, Extinguisher."

Did he really think fame and fortune would boost his career? That he would go down in history as the arresting officer of an Original Extinguisher?

What a human fool. Because as easily as that, I could just morph away. Yet, I wouldn't. I itched for a fight.

When he grabbed my wrist to twist it behind my back for a handcuff lock, I dropped completely to the floor, turning to face up.

He had intense concentration written across his boorish face as he used his brute strength to straddle me. He breathed deeply beneath his bulletproof vest, his diaphragm expanding his unnaturally hard chest. But I was passive, giving him a false sense of victory.

His gaze dropped to my breasts, the tops of which were softly pushed over my low-cut rounded neckline.

A slow, sultry smile began before I could stop it, as a new idea took hold. He lowered his heavy body onto me at the same time I raised and opened my thighs.

The exposed inches of steel blade that had been so uncomfortably strapped to my leg earlier pierced the one unprotected part of his body.

His tender testicles.

His face whitened before his eyes rolled back in his head. I pushed him off me and rose, casually fetching my backpack from against the fridge door.

Oh, it was just a little poke. He'd wake up eventually.

His partner was still talking to the woman when I slipped out. Just for kicks, I slid the pane of the window back into place, where dusty old grime and dried paint locked it into the frame like it'd never left.

Not sure how long it would be until Ethan woke, I decided to morph back home instead of waiting for the action between the bumbling human officers.

The shimmer began in my toes and ran rampant through my entire body, ending deep in my mind. Visions of the world around me blended together before distorting into new apparitions. Finally, they straightened into the place where I'd meant to be. My kitchen.

I hadn't been gone long. I quickly packed the bags of blood into the refrigerator and went to check on Ethan.

He felt stone cold, no movement whatsoever.

Pulling his cell phone out of a pocket of his discarded clothing, I searched through the menu to find a number. Reese.

He answered on the first ring.

"Reese, how is she?"

There was a pause. "Stable, I guess you could say. Still in her comatose state."

"That's how Ethan is."

"Did he feed?"

A tiny bit of guilt tinged my voice as I thought of the unused blood bags I'd brought home. "Yes."

I didn't mean I'd fed him. I'd meant I was able to feed him, though not from me. From the relief in his voice, Reese misunderstood, choosing to believe that I would be a donor because of our relationship.

"Good. He'll need the nutrition. Afton, if your mother is able to pull out of this, we need to figure out what to do with her. Releasing her to the care of humans merely means they'll drug her again, for the rest of her days. It also means your government will have the opportunity to take her for experimentation, seeking to find where she's been."

"No, I realize she can never return to human existence."

"She can stay here among the clan if you wish. If not, I'm sure we can find a neutral location, like a church. However, here we can protect her. The first thing your government will do is search out churches and take her against her will."

"Of course. It's what they did before. That's why she and Father Millicotti were at the same institution."

"I already have teams dispatched back to Concord Clinic for him. He's old but he has the benefit of being a previous blood donor in his favor. Our antibodies are in his system, protecting him from irreparable damage from the years of human drug use."

"Lucky for him."

"That's the good thing about him. He never donated with a motive in mind. He donated because he knew we starved, trying to hide from the beginning of the Academy. He knew we avoided humans, afraid we might accidentally harm one."

"So he offered himself as a guinea pig? If you took too much, you would learn from the mistake?"

"Yes. And though he has never requested it, we will take care of him."

"Okay, let me know if my mother's condition changes, Reese. I'm heading to check on Ethan."

"Will do. Good luck, Extinguisher."

We were getting along so well before he turned formal on me. "Ex," I muttered.

"Ex...tinguisher," he returned.

I disconnected. Patience was not my virtue.

Now that I'd lied, I guess I'd better feed Ethan. Grabbing a bag from the fridge, I headed into the bedroom. He lay flat on his back, facing the ceiling. I waved the bag under his nose, watching his nostrils flare, as if an automatic reaction.

"Wake up, baby. Let's eat," I cajoled.

Nothing.

I positioned his head so it tipped slightly back, as if to clear his airway for CPR. It was enough to open his mouth so I could pierce the bag on a fang.

While it didn't exactly wake him, he took the corner of the bag and sucked, draining the blood. The swallowing seemed almost instinctual, yet he did it without ever regaining consciousness.

I pulled the now empty bag away, tossing the crinkled mess into a wastebasket near the bed. Lifting Ethan's upper body, I propped a couple of pillows behind him.

"Wake up, Ethan. Come on."

I shook him repeatedly and finally his eyes opened. But he never saw. Instead, his eyes looked through me, staring at a point way past me.

"Hey, vampire," I chided softly. "Remember me?"

His eyes rolled back in his head as he slumped.

"Uh-uh, Ethan. Wake up." I was starting to panic now and hoped it didn't show through my voice. I was selfish, feeding him dead blood after he used this much strength to save my mother.

I was almost relieved when he finally responded.

"Bella?" he asked. "My...Bella? My...dolly."

I almost didn't catch that last word. Surely that wasn't Virginia's projection.

"Ethan? Who am I?" I said, loud enough to startle him with my fear.

"Dolly. Little dolly. They'll take you to keep you safe. But can you really be safe when you have the devil's genes?"

"What do you mean?" I whispered. There was no doubt I was speaking to Virginia's broken mind.

"The spawn of Satan...my sweet little dolly. I can't let them know."

"Who, Virginia?"

For long moments, Ethan's eyes stared ahead, as if he hadn't heard me. But I was left with a chilling new dilemma.

Had he?

Not that, I prayed. Please let him not be alert during the conversation between Virginia's mind and me.

I was sorry I'd woken him. But he didn't seem to be responding as Ethan.

"Virginia, you're going to be fine. You need to get better."

"Not with all these crazy blood suckers."

"They're not crazy, Mummy. They'll help you."

"Can't trust the monsters."

"You have to. I need you to get better for Father Millicotti. He's coming."

"Father?"

"Yes. He's coming and you have to get well so you can take care of him."

Ethan was silent while Virginia pondered this idea. A sense of elation ran through me. Why hadn't I thought of this before? I knew Virginia like the back of my hand. Years of stealing her secret files the Academy kept served me well. Virginia fought anyone trying to help her, as if her own self worth wasn't worth it. But she would fight just as fiercely for someone else. Give her the reason to exist.

"Mummy? Can I trust you to take care of Millicotti?"

Ethan's face was visibly relaxed as he slowly nodded. "What shall I do?"

"Let your mind relax. Accept Ethan's touch."

"It's a cold, invading poison, eating through my brain, destroying me."

"It's an antidote. The poison was already in your brain for so long, you've confused the two. You can't remember what it was like to be normal." She was quiet. I knew she considered the theory. "Mummy, remember the horrible monster you hate to think of? Who did ghastly things to you? That was the poison. Did he bite you? That has been spreading through you all this time. Ethan's mind is not poisoning you, it's new. It just started. It heals."

"That makes a little sense, but I'm so scared."

"Trust me."

"How do I know it's you? I can't see you!"

"Just feel me. This is your dolly." I ran my fingertips across Ethan's forehead and down his cheek. "You have to just trust, for Millicotti's sake."

I could see when she accepted my words. Ethan's face went expressionless as I lost the connection.

I pulled one of the pillows from behind him, letting his body slump more comfortably. I was so tired, I almost didn't have the strength for that simple move.

Slow as molasses, I peeled off my shirt, my pants, my boots. Curling onto Ethan's tattooed chest, I passed out.

## **Chapter Thirteen**

I came awake in waves—to a comforting awareness. A large hand, splayed across my back, holding me against the chest I knew as well as my own.

I inhaled his scent, wanting this memory burned into my memory forever.

"I have fed."

I paused in the inhalation of him. Wary of his tone.

"Yes."

"You did not feed me from your vein."

"I sought out a blood bank."

"Why? You knew I would heal instantly with live blood. Blood from your vein."

I sighed. "Ethan, let's not go into this. Not again."

Refusing to look up, I half traced the mermaid on his chest.

"When will you trust?"

The anger triggered. "What will you do if I never do?" I snapped. "There are no guarantees. I made you no promises about us."

"Your mother called you the devil's spawn. What does she mean by that?" he asked.

The statement caught my breath.

He'd remembered.

"How would I know?" I said, my voice a bit harsh in defense. "She's crazy."

"Is she?" he asked softly.

I refused to answer. I rose from him, my movements deliberate and slow and headed for the adjoining shower.

He was gone when I returned.

I wouldn't acknowledge my negative feelings, nor would I feel guilty. I would not miss him. It was for my own good.

To make matters worse, it stormed while I pondered these worthless feelings. More than once I wondered if the storm was brought on by him. I looked toward my balcony, thinking somehow it would be easier for him to contact me if I were out in nature with the whipping winds.

As if he would. I'd practically driven him away with my standoffish stubbornness. Yes, I knew he would heal faster with my blood as opposed to that from a bank, as he'd pointed out. And yes, it was the least I could have done considering how much he'd gone through for my own mother.

The guilt was horrendous. Once more, I looked toward my balcony but it was way past a hint of sprinkling rain. I opened the sheer curtains that shielded the outside world from my living quarters.

Lightning cracked against the black ink of the sky, followed by the angry roar of thunder. I hated these nights. Being raised in the deep underground tunnels of the camp meant I'd never before been exposed to them as a child. They were unfamiliar to me. How people slept through such raging anger Mother Nature had to offer was beyond me.

I curled against the pillow of my sofa, watching the rain pound against my French doors as if it fought to pass through the clear glass.

The pounding was rhythmic, like the beating of drums.

With Ethan gone, I had to sleep, I had to get to a normal human schedule. I needed to find a daytime job. I simply had to blend. Get out of my old routines.

But I couldn't relax.

The more I fought to stay calm and peaceful, the more it eluded me. I knew lying in the unmade bed that still smelled of Ethan was pointless, so I lay down flat on the sofa.

The rain was slowing. Funny little patterns were dancing against the glass. My eyelids felt heavy.

And I remembered.

"Shh, little one. It is time for our prayers. Do you have one?"

I'd nodded solemnly. "It is my very favorite." Eager to please, still so trusting and shy. They had taken me from my mommy but the doctors couldn't keep me long. A judge had sent me to live with Sister Emily. She was beautiful, her skin milky white and pure. Her dress, always black. But her hair, the most vibrant red, I thought of it as fire. Rich and energetic, always dancing about her head when she moved.

"Then I will let you recite it. Go ahead."

I closed my eyes, wanting so hard to please Sister Emily.

But at five, I was still impish, the devil in control of my soul. I opened one eye to see her reaction to my prayer.

"Dearest Lord, I thank you for my beauty. It's the only way I can tell I'm not related to the doctors of the Academy."

"Dear Sweet Lord," Sister Emily muttered, "Please keep one hand on her shoulder and the other over her mouth."

My eyes opened fully to an onslaught of tickling.

Not only did I love Sister Emily, she loved me back. Unconditionally. She always had soft touches for me, the stroke of a touch over my cheek, the curl of fingers in mine.

"Pray for you and pray for your mommy, little one," she whispered again.

My chest swelled with pride. "Now I lay me down to sleep." My voice rang true and clear. "I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die, before I wake —"

This was where terror clutched my heart, tightening my rib cage. A scream came from deep inside, a dark place where nothing should ever reside. A place which should be empty, not a pocket full of...monster.

That was what the doctors did to me. Injected me with monster. I wrenched from the dream, sitting up on my sofa in the damp darkness.

My scream ripped at my throat, rendering it raw with the wail of terror. A roar of thunder sounded at the same time, drowning out the horror in my voice.

Masking it.

I breathed deeply, the oxygen pure and sweet. My racing heart calmed steadily.

The universe gave me peace. It veiled my loss of control with a natural force much louder than I. Taught me that I was still small and could still be taken care of.

And that I could finish the child's prayer now. I shivered in the dark.

*I pray the Lord my soul to take.*

"Afton!" The yell came from the balcony outside my glass door. For a moment I panicked, until I remembered had the government found my location, they would have just materialized. There would be no warning.

A frenzied knocking followed. "Afton!" The voice was familiar.

Reese.

I opened the door and let him in. He was drenched, black hair hung limply against his prominent cheekbones. "What's wrong?" I asked, taking in his white face.

"Ethan."

A paralyzing fear gripped my body.

"He was captured by Extinguishers."

Despite the horror unfurling in my stomach, I felt the briefest relief. He hadn't been purposely staying away from me. He hadn't deserted me.

"What? How?" I asked.

It didn't make any sense. I had given him every training skill imaginable. He shouldn't get captured. Reese's silence said it all.

"He allowed them to take him, didn't he?"

"Yes."

"Why?" I hated when people were cagey and he wasn't answering quickly enough. "Why, dammit?"

"He wanted his capture kept secret."

"Why didn't your clan stop it?"

"It is a pact we have with Ethan. Never give up one for another. He made us swear."

"And who runs the clan if your leader is killed?" I snapped.

"I'm the second."

I paused, letting the information sink in. "Damn convenient."

His lips thinned. "Don't make me regret coming to you, Extinguisher."

There was something I was missing. "You're alone," I said. "No one knows you came?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I know you're the only one who can save him. You're the only one who's been in and back out of the facility. Yet he made us swear, under any circumstances, we are not to find you."

"How did you?"

"You have my son's necklace. I was able to trace the general vicinity."

Why the hell was Ethan trying to keep me safe, even after I disappointed him? The answer dawned on me before I even finished thinking the question.

"Oh, hell. They wanted me," I said softly.

Reese didn't need to verify. I saw it in his eyes.

Damn Ethan.

I locked the door behind us and pulled him into the kitchen, where we sat at the table. At least I tried to sit, soon I was up and pacing.

"I need to know everything. Every little detail before I head there," I said.

"They told Ethan they created an antivirus to keep humans from being infected by our virus. But they needed your blood to complete it. They had some on file but in order to activate it, make it react like 'live' blood, they had to introduce vampire blood to it. If he would volunteer, they'd agree to leave you alone and simply activate the blood they had stored."

"They had nothing! I destroyed my files when I left. They were worthless anyway, my blood is unique. It was useless to them, unable to be activated." Along with my eggs.

I would never be bred.

"Ethan didn't know that. All he knew was they would never leave you alone."

"Was he at full strength?"

Reese paused before answering. Confusion flickered in his eyes but he didn't ask. "No."

So it had been easy to capture him. And it was my fault. I'd given him dead blood.

"I'll get him," I promised. "But you need to care for my mother."

Reese nodded. "The human is doing amazingly well. She's almost resolved toward getting better. And asked when we would capture the priest."

"I promised her he would come, but she needed to be healthy to care for him."



"With Ethan, we could have attempted to retrieve him. But now since your mother's disappearance, security will be increased or he could be moved to another location."

"He's not moved yet?"

"I don't believe so. But our priority has been Ethan, not the human."

Now, though, I had a plan. "Coordinate our watches. When I send the signal, I'll start the entry into the compound. Have your men in place at the mental ward. Retrieve Millicotti at the exact same time. The government will be too distracted by my movements to deal with both."

"Won't you sneak into the compound?"

"Not at all. That's what they'll be expecting. I'm coming in full force."

## Chapter Fourteen

It was easy enough to get into the government camp. Men were still men, after all. A military-inspired uniform of a tight skirt and a little cap meant I had quick access to the security gate.

Once there, I took out the guard inside and used an accent to move into the surveillance building.

"This is Aleksandrina Losev. I have orders from Dr. Fokusovich to inspect your detection cameras."

"They're working fine."

"Yess. I am verry sure they are, soldier. However, I have orders to inspect them for myself."

He sighed but my Russian accent was the kicker. Fokusovich always used his own colleagues for security-related work and they somehow had the highest security clearance. No one ever knew who was farther up on the totem pole but if it was Russian, you could guarantee it.

Entering the room in which screens monitored every camera in the camp, I was careful to look bored. But I knew exactly which wing I was interested in. The main wing, which housed the good doctor himself, along with my old quarters. It was where they would also keep Ethan, being the most secure branch of the facility. They would not waste the specially improved security once used on me.

I punched a few numbers into the detector.

"What are you doing?" The guard asked suspiciously.

I smiled sultrily, rolling my rrs. "Testing the rrecording mechanism. Do you see?"

I punched a button and the cameras recorded. I hit the button again and real time was displayed on the monitors once more. "We have complaints of the tapes not always being readable. Recorded, you see? I must test every camera to see which is the problem *ree-cord* one."

"Every camera?" he groaned, his eyes skimming over the monitors.

"I should be a long while." I smiled.

He sighed, resigned to my testing. After watching through a few of the tests, he was completely bored, lost in his own thoughts. I took my time, punching buttons here and there and resetting cameras as I wanted them. Eventually I took pity on the loser and finished up, still moving as slowly as I could to avoid suspicion that I just wanted into the compound after accessing his checkpoint. He escorted me to the front gate, where I turned to head into the main facility.

I walked straight up to the front door. It was buzzed from the inside and the guard posted at the door looked up as I entered.

"What the hell—" he was cut off when my boot clipped the side of his head. I paused for a second, listening for the sound of running feet to alert me that the outside guard had seen.

I was safe. After all, this now-unconscious guard had been as confused as hell as to why he didn't see my approach on the monitors he had been watching.

Especially since this guard recognized me.

I walked down the hallway, still in my skirt and cap, my hair tucked up beneath.

When another armed suit approached me, I kept walking. "Ma'am? I need to see your credentials, please."

I shot him.

The blast echoed down the corridor. Someone came running at me from behind. I never bothered to look back and check his size. After all, he was running fast enough that I could guess at his weight by the pounding footsteps. I flipped him over my shoulder and broke his neck.

Taking an explosive from my belt, I taped it to the door before me and covered my ears. When the blast ripped, smoke filled the small hallway, setting off the sprinkler system. I didn't care, I was already inside the next compartment.

The laboratory of the most elite, the congregation quarters of the clique of top Russian doctors. At this point, I triggered my watch alarm to signal Reese.

"There's no need to practically blow up the entire compound," Dr. Trubachev said mildly. His voice carried over the intercom system. Speakers were in nearly every room of the compound. It brought back old memories of never being able to relax unwatched.

But I could be just as mild. Mimicry wasn't my only strong point. Besides, I wanted to emphasize my femininity by being sweet. That was always the one thing they wanted from me. Procreation. The carrying on of my uniquely feminine genes and gifts. "Pardon me. But I felt I had to make a point of letting you know this isn't a social call. I'm not here to stay."

"Of course, we would never keep you against your will. You're retired," Trubachev agreed.

"Yet you have Ethan against his."

"He is not human. He has no rights. This is a war, Afton. Us against them."

I turned into a uniform storage closet. It was amazing that the facility stayed exactly the same throughout the years.

I quickly changed into more protective gear, not Extinguisher gear but training gear. More freedom to move about in. I continued speaking, knowing he had connections in the small room. And not caring that he watched as I changed. "If I stay to help you test your antivirus, you'll release him?"

He sounded thoughtful. "You've always had a soft spot for the vampires."

"That's why I've killed more than my fair share?"

"No. Perhaps I mean just this one."

I tried to keep my tone light. "He is my favorite."

"He doesn't know our little secret, does he?"

I hate when people generalize. He used "our little secret" when he knew damn good and well it was all mine. But as Fokusovich's assistant, he was privy to details he shouldn't have. That was when I decided my secret needed to die, once and for all.

I turned and kicked in the door to his office, striding in as if I owned the place.

"No one should," I whispered purposefully as I faced the good doctor. "Right?"

He remained calm but ever so slowly, he swallowed. His Adam's apple was hugely noticeable in his birdlike column of a neck. He was hardly aware of still having the attached microphone on, so our conversation continued to echo throughout the hallways. "Of course not. But back to the subject, Dr. Fokusovich and I will order his release once we're allowed to test your blood. It should remain active for about five minutes once drawn, so we'll have to act quickly."

I knew there had been none on file.

"Where would you like me?"

"That's the problem. Because your blood dies so quickly, we'll need to get everything else set up. It should be tomorrow by the time we're ready. You're welcome to come back then, although I'm sure you understand we can't release the vampire until our testing. If you would rather, you have free rein of the lab."

"You'll allow Ethan freedom within the lab?"

"I can confine him to your old wing. Freedom throughout the compound may make the guards nervous. I'd hate any accidents to occur."

"I'll stay in my old quarters along with Ethan then."

"Of course."

"And I do hope you don't mind, but I'll be disabling all cameras for my own privacy."

His mouth tightened just the tiniest bit. For all his scientific training, for all he knew regarding the importance of breeding me, the thought of a human bedding a vampire disgusted him. And yet my compliance in breeding was the highest level of testing ever. My willingness to participate was the utmost priority. Hell, he had orders to look the other way if I'd have wanted to bed a cat. "As you wish. I'll notify Dr. Fokusovich. Welcome home, Afton."

I let him live that day. I turned and walked out of his office, making my own way to my old quarters. Guards had appeared while I was inside with Trubachev and were lined up and down the hallway in full attack mode. I didn't acknowledge them, nor did they acknowledge me.

Down the left of the corridor, on a corner unit, was where I'd called home for most of my life.

I pressed my fingerprint to the electronic lock and it swung open without hesitation. Just like so long ago.

Ethan sat at a small conversation table as I entered. He was next to me in two easy steps, holding me close with his face buried in my hair, yet his voice shook with anger.

"What are you doing here? I thought I made it clear you weren't to be told. This is a trap."

"Of course it is. But I couldn't sit back and let them have you."

"Why do I love such a stubborn woman?"

"How can you not realize I take care of myself?"

He lifted his head to look around the sterile environment. "Now I see why you insist on trusting no one."

I was almost embarrassed at how my rooms appeared as I looked through new eyes. Barren and cold, it was a bleak environment. There was nothing of personality, no color. Simply stark black and white.

"I can't even imagine the horrors you went through," he said, his voice hard. It was exactly what I needed.

"No child needs to go through it," I agreed. Needing my own strength, I moved from his arms, climbed atop the table and pulled the wiring from the main speaker located in the ceiling directly above. I waited until the disconnection fizzled and popped before I spoke again. "Which is why I'm back. I need to take care of matters. When I left during retirement, I destroyed my files. They don't have anything on me. Dead blood samples of mine would be useless, even if I hadn't destroyed them. My blood is unable to be activated, even with the vamp virus to stimulate it."

"Why?" he was understandably puzzled. For in that respect, I was different from every other Extinguisher.

I sat down on the small bed. "It's a long story. You'll be the only other one who knows, besides me, the one who created me and his assistant."

He sat next to me, reaching for one of my hands.

"The difference with me is not only was I stricken at three, instead of eight. If that had been the only thing, maybe I could have been recreated. But, well..." my voice dropped to a whisper. "I also have vampire genes."

His voice was as incredulous as mine would have been if the situation had been reversed. "What! How can that be? Vampires and humans are not able to procreate."

"Somehow, it happened with me."

He stared in shocked disbelief. But I also knew he was trying to work out why so much of what made me unique made sense. "Who are your parents, Afton?"

"I don't know. I mean, my mother *is* Virginia. She was human. She was committed to the insane asylum so her child—me—could be taken away and stricken. Somehow, two of the doctors here knew I was part vampire and wanted me desperately."

"Then who is your father? The vampire?"

"I'm not positive, I just suspect. He was my first kill when I was thirteen. I'd discovered the top-secret files a year earlier, telling of my genetic makeup and hinting that it was an unknown vamp and human. But it wasn't until he died that I discovered he had been the one. The doctors didn't know he was the one either because they would never have allowed him to die if that was the case. I think that *he* was the only reason why I was able to be stricken. It was his blood they'd used. It was enough of a push to enhance my vampire abilities, baffling the rest of the doctors who didn't know what my gene pool was. Yet they continually tried to re-create why I was the best of the Original Extinguishers."

"But someone knew of the genes?"

"One knew. Dr. Fokusovich, the head doctor. Now his assistant, Trubachev, also knows. Neither was aware I knew. And still, no one knows that the vampire they used to infect me was my genetic father. To keep them from finding out, I had to kill Dr. Morozov along with my first vampire kill when I was thirteen, in case the correlation was revealed later upon discussion, or in his notes."

"How can it be kept secret?"

"All Extinguishers contain vampire DNA when stricken. I appeared no different from anyone else."

Ethan was quiet for a moment, studying my face intently. "Afton, were those the issues you had with me tasting your blood?"

I nodded.

"But we should find out whose genes you carry. It could affect which abilities you attain, or those you don't yet know you have. Vampires have certain inherited skills."

It was those "skills" I may have inherited that I dreaded finding out about. Yet, I had already resigned myself to this. Unfortunately, because I did suspect who the monster was who was my father.

"I know," I said softly. "I just didn't want to know for sure if he is definitely my father. But I know that we need to strengthen you for your release. You're still weak from feeding you dead blood." Finally, I allowed regret to tinge my voice. "I'm sorry about that."

He knew it was necessary for him now to have my blood. Of that, there was no question but he tried to soothe my feelings beforehand. "There's nothing I could learn about you that I don't want to know, *bella*."

He hit the nail right on the head. His rejection was the one thing I'd never been through. And this, this knowledge could cause it. Once he found out who I suspected the vampire was who fathered me, could he possibly still love me?

But perhaps he wouldn't even know of Ramon Durant. Vampires were widespread, he could easily be from a distant clan.

"You've always tried to hide from me. I love you, *bella*. I love you exactly the way you are."

I couldn't answer him. I wasn't used to feeling weak. I had no idea my head hung low until he raised it with a touch to my chin, lifting me. Startled, I blinked into his eyes.

"What are you trying to keep from me, my love?" His face softened with a slight smile. "I already know you love me."

I smiled also. "I do love you. Maybe I don't want you to know how much."

"Let's keep honesty between us always. Only then can we make this bizarre relationship work."

I nodded.

"What is your biggest fear, Afton?"

"Still...it's...if I should die."

"Why?"

"I'm not sure."

"Aren't you?" he probed.

Oh, I was. "I'm not sure if it really means death. Or if I'll rise as something else."

He understood exactly. "And not knowing your father, you're not sure what you'll rise as?"

"I'm the unknown also. I suspect my father's identity. If I'm right, my rising won't be pretty. But, I'm not even sure that I *will* rise. The human factor in me could take over and leave me in a permanent death."

"Are you ready to face your fear?"

I couldn't not be. I had to prepare myself. "To face my fear, I have to embrace death."

"Not necessarily."

"I have to. We don't know what tomorrow brings."

"Exactly. But think baby steps. Rather than embrace death, let's just take the first step and find out a little of what you are."

He held me tight. His lips closed the distance between us.

I parted mine and he inserted his tongue. I met it eagerly, tasting and seeking and giving as much pleasure as I sought from him. His hand came up to cup the back of my head, possessively holding me to him as if I would even want to refuse his touch.

"Do not think about it," he muttered, kissing along my jaw. I inhaled deeply, trying to get oxygen to balance my racing adrenaline.

This was it. This would make or break us.

He licked alongside my neck and I froze slightly. Was it time? Would he bite?

I needn't have worried. As if he sensed my trepidation, he merely continued kissing me softly.

"God," he muttered, pushing my head to the side to extend my neck to him.

Like before, he licked the skin first. "Afton," he muttered thickly. Once again, his lips closed onto my neck. But this time, he scraped my outstretched tendon gently.

And then he bit, puncturing me.

It was painful, at first. But with pain comes pleasure. I felt his increasing joy as he nourished from my willing body. I experienced an almost maternal instinct that at the same time, pulsed like a sexual need. A wanton need, powerful and exotic. Both feelings flushed through my body, a wave of bliss washing over me.

A gasp, then a decidedly feminine moan. Good lord, it was mine.

Nothing mattered at this moment. I was with Ethan, we were together at last and the fear of the consequence of what my blood contained disappeared. It was as if a mood enhancer hit my bloodstream instantly and wiped away everything remotely negative.

But as soon as he stopped sucking, I came back to awareness. I could hear his deepened breathing near my ear, where he had brought his head down to my shoulder. While my racing heart slowed, the inner fears and doubts crept back in. I tensed, waiting for him to speak, to share with me what he'd learned.

I knew it wasn't good. His white face said it all.

He leaned backward on the bed, flat on his back, staring at the ceiling. "God, no."

There. It was out. There was no turning back. "I'm sorry. I guess it is..."

"Ramon Durant," he said.

"Yes. That's who I thought it may have been." My gut twisted. "So you know of him?"

Ethan nodded, unable to speak. This was bad. Very bad.

"Who is he?" I whispered, cold terror deep in my gut.

"My stepfather."

Oh, God. It was even worse. The monster who murdered his mother and sister. "What? That can't be."

"He was your father, Afton. You carry the genes of Ramon Durant, the one vampire I made the decision to exterminate for his twisted personality. My stepfather was your father."

I caught my breath. It was as painful as I expected. I knew Ramon was the epitome of monster—he was my first experience at vampires.

"He was a horrible human. Now we know our basic human imprints are magnified when we become vampire. He was evil, insane. It became much worse when he crossed over."



I struggled to find hope that I wasn't related to the horrible creature, that I didn't share his genes. "But you said you killed that vampire. It can't be him. I killed him when I was thirteen."

Ethan was silent. "Did you watch him die?"

"I ripped out his spine," I said it before catching myself.

"He's definitely dead then." Ethan's voice was mild. "Well, it's possible he was captured by this place before completely cold. That perhaps I didn't do the job. Remember I said I left him to greet the sun?"

I nodded. "What did he do for you to decide to destroy him?" I carefully phrased it so he wouldn't lay any blame on himself.

"He was a rapist. He murdered my mother and raped my baby sister, making it his life's mission to impregnate anyone he could. He'd become infertile when he crossed over, though apparently he wasn't infertile to humans."

"Your stepfather," I whispered. I knew the story about Ethan's family but somehow it seemed more real now.

Ethan flinched. "I should have suspected when Virginia was your mother. We hunted her because she was tortured by Ramon. You are that product?"

"Yes," I whispered.

"We had no idea. She hid her pregnancy and your birth well. In fact, I remember the news about a child being taken from a mental patient to enroll at the Academy. That must have been you."

I said nothing. There wasn't anything to say.

"I could have prevented your upbringing, *bella*." His voice was tortured.

"And I wouldn't be who I am today. Perhaps I would have been a weaker individual who would have slit her throat when she found out about her parentage. Because trust me, the urge is there. I'll always wonder which of Ramon's tendencies I carry."

"You're nothing like him, sweet."

"Which is why I'm terrified of death. If I pass and return as a vampire, will my personality change?"

Ethan stayed quiet. There was no way we'd ever know.

"How long have you had the fear of dying?"

"Thirteen. Since I slew him."

"*Bella*, they must know you'll nourish me and I'll be at my full strength. Do you really think they intend to let me survive?"

I was surprised by his train of thought.

"Of course." But he didn't know. No one knew their main objective except for me, because I had hacked into my own files. "Ethan, their primary focus is to create another me. Dr. Fokusovich knows of my vampire genes and has figured I'll best be compatible

with a vampire. He wants to breed me with you. Tonight, hopefully. But he won't kill you unless he can find a rapist vampire elsewhere, because he knows I can't be in vitro fertilized. No, he'll keep you for me."

Ethan looked sick at what was merely a fact of life for me.

"If I was able to have children, I'm sure I would have long before now," I whispered. "With you. I'm pretty sure I'm sterile, much like Ramon was. I think it was a fluke that he impregnated Virginia."

"Come here."

I slid closer to him. He ran a fingertip down the side of my face, trailing it just under my jaw.

"There's something you need to know about the relationship of Ramon to my family."

I held my breath, trying not to let any emotion cross my face.

"Ramon was the hardest justice I ever had to dole. Partly because it was not an unemotional punishment. Back then, leaders of a clan dealt with their own rather than shipping it off elsewhere. Ramon was on trial for the rape of my sister...after my mother's death."

A flashback hit me, causing me to suck in my breath as if sucker-punched. The taunting of Ramon right before I killed him. The grating tones that intimidated I too, would like my sex with violence.

"What is it?" Ethan said, watching carefully.

"I just thought of something. It happened long ago, before I killed him. He told me I would enjoy rape."

I'd closed my eyes briefly against the pain it caused.

They were furiously wrenched open when Ethan gripped the back of my hair forcefully, elongating my neck.

"You are not him, *bella*. Never let him convince you otherwise. You have overcome obstacles that would have killed anyone with lesser values."

There was a roaring in my ears. "Ethan," I whispered. His emotions were running rampant. Apparently my blood had done its duty of nourishing him properly. His strength was up to full speed, though a little out of control.

His eyes refocused and his grip lessened. The air became easier to breathe once more.

"Don't waste your strength," I cautioned.

"Too late," he whispered.

"I can't give you more blood," I warned. "Not without zapping my own strength."

"Just a good night's rest," he promised. "You'll be able to give me more in the morning, before they arrive for us."

"They'll arrive at six," I said. "They have rigid timelines. Militaristic."

"We'll awaken at five," he said. "You'll feed me and we'll destroy this place before we leave."

I smiled. "Now we're on the same plan, my love."

The air was still thick and heady. We stared at each other in silence, our breathing becoming heavier. I couldn't help but think back to the slow and sensual sucking of my blood. The feelings that had coursed through my veins not ten minutes earlier.

His eyes dropped to my lips, which felt like they'd plumped under his gaze. Leaning forward, he gently nipped my bottom lip.

I reached up and cupped the back of his head, holding his mouth firmly to me. His lips slanted over mine, his tongue darting out to taste mine.

I moaned. "Do we dare?"

"Why not? You disabled the speakers and the monitors."

"Ethan. They're hoping for this, planning on breeding me. Fokusovich is praying at this moment that the catalyst of vampire genes will finally impregnate me."

"Say the word and I'll stop."

But I couldn't. He nuzzled my neck, licking gently. My hand trembled as I cradled his face, bringing his gaze back up to mine. "I love you. I always have. I always will."

"I know, sweet. But thank you for finally admitting it."

My lips curled. Of course, he would act blasé.

I pressed my lips to his neck and traced my tongue along his collarbone. I'd missed him so. The scent of his skin enticed me, triggering the recent hormones that had raced through my bloodstream. Wicked thoughts caressed my mind as surely as if he'd touched me already.

I unzipped the silver clasp of the Extinguisher uniform I wore. The noise was loud with only the sound of our heavy breathing in the room. When the zipper reached the bottom, he pushed the top from my shoulders easily. The pants followed the removal of my shoes, leaving me completely bare while he was dressed.

I kissed the corner of his mouth, then tilted my lips to his, deepening the kiss, licking his lips, tasting his tongue. His thumbs and forefingers found my nipples, rubbing them between his fingers. They tingled beneath his touch hardening to points. I couldn't wait to have the heat of his mouth sucking them.

"You have always been so beautiful, *bella*."

He leaned forward and licked a trail across my collarbone. Desire spread through my midsection, spiraling through my limbs. I was desperate for more of his touch.

His lips burned down to my breasts, where he squeezed them together and licked first one nipple, then the other. He murmured against my wet flesh, his breath hot and tingly. "There are so many things I want to do to you."

His words heightened my desire. "Like what?"

His eyes rolled up to stare into my own. "I want to lick you from head to toe. Every single spot in between. I want to find every delicious nook, every sensitive cranny. I want to thrust into you hard and plunge into you soft. I want to watch you make yourself come, because there is nothing more beautiful in the world."

"Baby," I smiled. "I wouldn't get that far. I'd be begging for you to finish me off before I ever got there. Or I'd be kneeling between your legs, sucking you into my mouth."

He shuddered at my words. "Keep talking," he said huskily and licked his finger. When it was wet, he trailed it down my body. Then he sucked my nipple into his mouth.

"I'd trace the tiny seam between your balls," I said.

I gasped when his finger plunged into my sheath. He stroked the swelling of my walls and I bore down, gripping him tightly. It was insanely erotic to have him deep within me.

"Then?"

I tried to continue, but his finger tickling the lip of my cervix was driving me crazy.

"I'd lick straight up the seam to the base of your cock. I'd trace around it, then slowly alongside it, down to the head."

His thumb was gently pressing on my clitoris now.

"I'd lick the opening on the head before I suck it into my mouth," I gasped. His thumb pressed harder. "Then I'd taste the ridge on the head with my tongue pointed sharply."

His mouth stopped sucking my nipple and he moved lower. Bending my legs at the knees, he spread them up and apart. I grabbed a pillow, propping it behind me so I could watch him better. My favorite position, to watch him.

His eyelids were heavy as he studied his finger buried in my sex. Slowly he pulled it out and circled my swollen clitoris.

Fire rolled from the point of contact upward. His fingertip was hot, slick and heavy. I craved it pushing directly on the nub again.

He spread my labia with one hand. My clitoris stood proud and exposed, glistening with the juices that coated it. He bent his head and gave it a long lick which left it quivering.

"Ethan," I gasped. "Do it again."

He looked up at me. "I want you to be mine, *bella*. I want to be the only one who ever lies between your thighs."

"Anything," I gasped when his wicked tongue traced an exotic spiral over my slit, ending on the tiny pearl.

"Be sure, Afton. I want you to understand, I love you too much to ever let you go. I want you in all ways, body, mind, soul. I want marriage, I want devotion, I want the whole thing."

He was very serious, the lights in the room flickered slightly with his emotions. But his lips clamped down on my sensitive flesh and I moaned as he sucked it into his mouth. "Yes, Ethan. Of course I am yours. Always."

"Marriage?"

"As soon as we can," I assured him, then let my head drop back on the pillow as he pleased me.

Aching flames were licking deep inside my womb. I was insatiable with lust, my hips rocking back and forth against his mouth, bumping against his teeth. Suddenly, my climax burst from me in spirals of explosions.

I collapsed backward, weak as a limp rag.

I heard the rustling of fabric and knew he was pushing his pants down. His erection sprang out, strong and thick in a nest of dark curls trimmed short. He pulled his shirt over his head, exposing tight abs, a perfectly defined chest and biceps.

My image over his heart.

He was perfection. Wanton need stirred again in my body, lust from the mere sight of his physical beauty. As if that wasn't enough, he grasped his cock within his strong hand. Deliberately, he stroked up and down its length, then guided it to where my legs were spread.

It felt as gentle as a kiss where it touched me. It lay in the wetness of my body, right at the entrance of my cunt. He gripped my hips and rocked his pelvis against me, like an exotic dancer. The broad head pressed in with his circular rotations. I stretched my legs up, circling my ankles behind his neck.

In one thrust, he filled me.

I moaned and his thumbs rubbed at my hipbones as he danced within me.

"Ethan, that's it," I murmured, barely able to express myself with the heightened feelings coursing through my veins. He reached high up inside me, triggering an insatiable hunger.

One of his hands left my hip to rub my slit with his thumb. He massaged my clitoris, driving me wild in the new position of my legs closed together.

"Harder," I demanded, waves of lust rolling over me. The smell of sex permeated the air, thick and heady.

He thrust harder, his heavy testicles slapping against my anus.

"You drive me wild," he muttered. "You are so sexy, I could take you over and over and never be tired."

"We'll test that theory," I assured him. "I can't hold out, Ethan. I'm going to come hard."

"Come for me, my beauty. I love to watch."

I writhed around his cock. "Then watch me."

I separated my legs, curling one down and pushing on his shoulder with my hand to let him know I wanted him down. Without letting him slip from my pussy, he was suddenly flat on his back with me positioned on him, where I could ride freely.

A wicked glint sparked in his eye. "My favorite," he murmured.

"Mine too," I agreed, as I took his hands and sucked the fingers that had been in my sex.

I rode freely, bearing down so he was buried to the hilt deep in the recesses of my cunt. I circled on him, making him groan. His thumbs and forefingers pinched my hard nipples, triggering sharp shocks of pleasure-pain.

I tossed my head back when another explosion hit, ripping throughout my body. The walls of my sheath clenched him, gripping him tightly, milking his cock and forcing his climax also.

"*Bella,*" he groaned, tangling his fingers in my hair when I collapsed onto his chest.

## Chapter Fifteen

Being back in the environment thrust me right into old habits. At five a.m., even though safely ensconced in Ethan's arms, I awoke.

He was already awake and watching me. "It is time?"

"Yes. They'll be here in an hour."

It was when guards always made their rounds. We showered and dressed in twenty minutes. But way too early, before Ethan could feed, the electronic door swung open. Black-garbed guards entered, wearing guns. They looked warily at me at the same time they encircled Ethan.

"We'll need you both restrained to be escorted out." The voice over the loudspeaker echoing from the hallway was undoubtedly Dr. Fokusovich.

Ethan looked quickly at me. I cursed my stupidity. The entire camp felt Ethan's loss of control last night and the doctors decided to stir up the usual routine, pouncing upon us earlier than usual.

And he hadn't fed enough for full strength.

Ethan's hands were handcuffed behind his back. He turned to me, pressing one last kiss to my lips. "I'll wait for you at the nest."

I nodded, my stomach in knots. He was telling me we had to strike separately.

But only half the guards escorted him out. The rest stayed behind with me. Something didn't feel right. I shifted my weight and the guards inched a cautious circle around me.

"What the hell is going on?" I called loudly to Fokusovich, who remained strangely silent on the loudspeaker outside. The guards had purposely left the door open, making it easy for him to listen in.

"Now, Afton," said the one in front. Hartley. One of the Originals, who was now a human guard. The bastard who had been set to impregnate me so long ago. "Surely you don't blame us for escorting you to Dr. Fokusovich?"

Then why would we be standing around uneasily, both sides waiting for the other to strike? I made a small motion to move for the door and the eight men around me reached for their guns. I froze as they drew, the heavy metal clicking as it scraped from the holsters they carried.

"What is this, HB-8?" I asked softly. Just referring to his old name asserted my superiority. If it wasn't for me, he'd still be a letter and a number. Just as they all had been.

"I only want to make sure you stay peaceful," he returned easily enough. He was a man now and skilled enough to no longer fight against the aggression the testosterone treatments had caused when we were younger.

"You'd better be prepared. If any harm comes to Ethan, you'll die," I warned.

The barest hint of something rolled across his face.

Truth. Triumph. Satisfaction.

They never had any intention of letting Ethan go. I was a fool to think I had the upper hand. I realized it almost instantly as I watched the different expressions roll over his face.

I was faster than most Extinguishers but Hartley was an ex-Extinguisher. And an Original. He was good enough for the human guards but he'd never followed instructions well enough to be kept on our squad and therefore didn't have full training.

Personally, I believe he wanted to be one of the guards. He was stronger and able to bully the rest of the human men, whereas on the Extinguishing squad he was low man on the totem pole.

He was the one I attacked. The strongest, the fastest.

I attacked before any of the others were even aware of it. I morphed behind him, punched a hole in his back and grabbed his heart from between his shoulder blades. One guard shot at the spot where I had been standing, hitting empty air in the middle of the circle and taking out the man directly across from him. The rest froze, afraid to kill each other in an accidental gunfire.

It was a tricky move on my part, to continue with the element of surprise. To use the shock effect of Hartley's death to terrify the human men who looked up to him as an ex-Extinguisher.

Fear caused their next paranoia. I tossed the useless body into the middle of the circle unexpectedly and one foolish guard shot, triggering the chain reaction anyway. All men were focused on releasing a bullet on the already dead body, wasting their time and gunfire. From behind them, I was able to morph behind each one and break a neck, a spine, or rip out a vital organ, one on one, as I killed each of them. The guards were no match for my speed, though their higher training placed them a step up from human police.

Before I knew it, I stood alone. I hoped Ethan fared as well.

I grabbed a few guns from the fallen men, slipping them into my waistband and walked through my front door without pause. I looked up and down both ways. No footsteps sounded, signifying more Extinguishers.

There was also no sign of Ethan or his guards in sight, no clue as to which direction they may have headed. I had two choices—left, to the underground lab or right, to the headquarters of Dr. Fokusovich.



I strode farther down the hallway, aware that the cameras watched by the careful swivel of each lens before another took view. Purposefully, I headed to the main facility, where headquarters would be located. The echo of my heels on the polished stone floors were the only sound in the eerily silent facility.

Until the loudspeakers overhead echoed.

"Afton."

I ignored the voice, even though I knew who it was. Training had been enforced to respond always. Now, anger slightly colored his tone at my deliberate defiance of their rules.

"A3!"

I hadn't been referred to that in years. It was a direct insult, which I would ignore for the time being. Until I could reach for his scrawny neck.

The good doctor took a deep breath as he tried to calm his own emotions. His voice was a bit more placating when he spoke again.

"Afton, where are you headed? Surely you don't think to take on the entire compound single-handedly?"

I didn't bother to look upward at the voice emanating from the vicinity of the cameras. I knew he watched and wouldn't give him the satisfaction of my respectful authoritative training.

"Worried?" I called out, without making eye contact.

His overhead chuckle was pretentious. "Vanity! You were the best of the Extinguishers, that's true enough. But we have at least a dozen and a half now, with another two dozen in training. Not to mention the human guardage. Do you really think to take all that on?"

So the bastard needed a demo. Fine with me. Apparently he didn't know about the human guardage I'd already taken down.

Up ahead was the training room, a room in which every spare moment of our downtime was utilized. While humans took breaks in a coffee room, Extinguishers took breaks in the training room, where we worked. The room was never unoccupied. More importantly, beyond the room was the office of the assistant, Dr. Trubachev. All branches of my secrets had to be exterminated.

"They are aware you're coming, Afton. They can hear the intercom system in there."

"I remember," I said dryly and kicked open the double doors.

They were already positioned in a fighting stance but it didn't matter. Quickly, I registered a quick assessment of the room.

There were only eight.

I tried not to look surprised at the youth of the faces. Yet in spite of the immaturity, there was a hardness there. They were machines, deprived of emotion. Just like I had once been.

Before Ethan.

And they had trained well. None attacked first. If I also refused to move, we'd be at a standstill.

Yet, I'd always succeeded because I thought for myself. Right now, I didn't have time to mess around. I had to find my vampire.

I jumped vertically—straight up, all the way to the ceiling. The fastest of the trainees was able to track my speed, tilting his head back as he watched me grab onto the light fixture. He had an advantage over the rest of the men, so he would be the first I'd take out.

His tilted head was exactly the position I needed, his being the nearest face to me. I kicked before his instinct told him to turn away. The cartilage in his nose shot directly into his brain behind the force of my steel-toed boot. His eyes didn't even roll back into his head before he died.

The trainee next to him lost the next precious second in shock over the instantaneous death next to him. Apparently the trainees had not been taught the important lesson of not depending or trusting a colleague.

Never trust a brother who had been stricken and trained with you, like a clone of yourself. They would be the first to turn on you.

Maybe that was a lesson plan the Academy of Extinguishers did away with. Foolish how they'd always tried to re-create my success by fixing areas they assumed were broken. One day, they might catch on to whatever had been done to me worked beyond their wildest dreams. That day, they would set up their trainees with a traitor in their midst to teach them the lesson from hell.

But not for this bunch of kids. This bunch was done for. The second-in-training realized it just before the stiletto of my boot pierced his eyeball at an angle deep enough to puncture the cerebellum between his sockets, lobotomizing him instantly. But he was lucky, he still could live.

Two down, six left. Six was easy enough for me to handle, I'd done it routinely. And now they were just as ready, having witnessed the full attack of two of their own.

I dropped from the fixture into the center of the room, ducking when one struck a kick. A natural-born sixth sense, had me kicking out behind me, at the same time I bent from the waist, pleased when my foot connected. I grabbed the raised kicking leg in front of me and pulled it toward me to block the punch from another.

The leg cracked from the force. Before I dropped it, I kicked his standing leg. The knee shattered and I tuned out his screams. Worthless to me now, I tossed my human shield aside.

Immediately, I dropped and rolled. Two of the men locked their arms for a fighting stance, more power together. I grabbed a gun from my belt and Tasered the two of them. They should have known that was one of the drawbacks of fighting with a partner. It was why we were taught the skill, but hardly ever used it. It had some uses but should one be harmed, you were simultaneously taken down.

My Taser was set to kill, the electric beam high enough to boil your blood. Not a pretty sight, for the steam had to erupt from stressed areas of the body.

Eyes, ears, mouth.

The smell was gagging also, since the stench of inwardly cooked parts was evident. I quickly switched the trigger on the gun from Taser to bullet, giving the last three old-fashioned shots to the abdomen. It would mean slow deaths, for there was small blood loss in the GI. The bullet was less likely to bounce around and cause damage, since the gut absorbs forward energy.

All men were down, with considerable groaning from those still alive. I turned on my heel and continued my purposeful stride down a smaller, narrower hallway.

But a small noise from behind me caught my attention. A door was closed, presumably locked. I remembered the small room, no bigger than a closet, in which a giant window allowed the person inside to watch the Extinguishers train.

I turned the doorknob, and for once a room was not locked. A white-faced guard stood, his hand on the head of a tiny little girl, no more than three or four.

Her hair was blonde but shorn close to her head. Her eyes stared, huge and brown. She was unusually small and stood with her thumb plugged into her mouth.

My stomach roiled. She'd witnessed the carnage through the one-way window.

"A child?" I spat.

"An experiment," he answered. He was young too, his voice not yet fully mature. "One almost as young as you were."

They had tried to re-create the theory that a younger child would make a better Extinguisher. Obviously a stolen child, for the legal age was eight.

"What is her name?"

"N-338."

"I'll let you live today," I snapped to the guard. "On one condition. Get her upground. Go through the west wing, the cameras lie. The guards will be kept busy."

I turned on my heel.

The voice over the loudspeaker picked up as soon as the cameras had me in their view.

"What did you do to the cameras in the rooms, Afton?"

"Set them all to *play* as opposed to *record*. You've been watching old videos in every room except for the hallway you see me in now."

I had meant it when I said the cameras lie.

"Untrue! You couldn't have killed eight men in the span of ten minutes."

"My speed has improved," I said in my mildest tone.

"I don't believe it."

"Do you see any of them chasing me?"

I knew by the pause that he thought about it. But it was too late, for I arrived at the next room.

The door crashed open with a kick, the electrical current fizzing and popping but never touching me with the help of the rubberized Extinguisher boots.

Dr. Trubachev stood in the middle of the room, a gun in hand, aimed at the door. His pea-sized head sat incongruously on his overweight body, with sparse, coarse hairs sprouting over the egg-shaped skull. His bottom lip quivered.

"You and I had a secret between us, did we not?" I asked gently.

"You've gone crazy," he shrieked. "You're a demented monster! Like one of them!"

He shot wildly but I was ready for it. Before the gun even went off, I morphed to a spot where I'd stood long ago as a child. On a scale where he would weigh me daily.

From the scale, I calmly reached for the hand that held the gun and turned it toward his temple.

It was so quick, his human brain couldn't track the time difference before he squeezed the trigger again. In slow motion, I appreciated his Adam's apple bobbing up and down once before blowing his brains and spattering the wall behind him with the thick, gelatinous goo.

I wouldn't need the gun. With a push, I shoved his headless body backward and again walked through the door.

I was barely aware of the screaming over the loudspeaker.

"Trubachev. To headquarters! Trubachev!"

Dr. Fokusovich wasn't thinking. He left the intercom on, so even if Trubachev was able to call, he couldn't get through. I could hear the panic in his high-pitched voice and knew he was about to repeat the page even though barely a second had passed. But he was too late. I had reached the main computer room. Just beyond it was the headquarters belonging to the voice himself.

The doctor I hated most.

Dr. Fokusovich.

## Chapter Sixteen

I entered the main computer room just as the overhead viewing monitors were switched back to record, giving the first show of what had recently transpired in the training room. On the oversized screens, five bodies lay completely still. Three writhed in agony.

I tore my eyes away. Along the walls of the room, guards lined the way. Guns were drawn, pointing directly at me.

"I will kill any and all who tangle with me," I said in my most mild voice.

"Drop your weapons," ordered the commander's voice. The human guards showed quick surprise, losing eye contact to glance at him. I wasn't surprised at his command, I knew I was too valuable to waste without testing. And I was useless to them dead. For all Dr. Fokusovich's false claims, my blood could never be reanimated, not even when mixed with vampiric blood.

He was an egotistical bastard, his greed over wanting so desperately to dissect me winning out over the danger of keeping me alive. It was the last mistake he'd ever make.

Slowly, the guns were all put away and I walked directly ahead to the door that led to Fokusovich's office. I put all my anger into the kick, which took very little effort. The door broke away from the doorjamb with a crash, leaving an even bigger hole.

He stood unprotected, ready to face the music.

I'm not sure what I expected but this wasn't it.

Now he was bent over, years of hunching taking their toll. His head looked even more misshapen with years of balding. What hair he did have was soft and fine, like the downy fur of a baby chick. He was more pathetic than evil.

Where was my fear now? The doctor was a man, just a man. Old now, still evil but not strong and big like my memories when I was a child.

The Dr. Frankenstein I remembered.

To a child, he'd been huge and heavy, larger than life and hideously deformed, a monster with an evil streak, just as ugly inside as he was out.

But he had my Ethan.

"Where is he?" I hissed, moving quickly across the room so the sharp tip of my knife blade pressed directly under his chin. An inner war raged within me, I could hardly fight against the temptation to slice through his flimsy flesh, much like I'd watched the throat ripped from his colleague so many years ago by the fangs of...my father.

"Do it," he demanded, his voice ever the nasally whine, even worse in person than over the loudspeaker. "You'll never find the vampire if I'm dead."

"Bastard."

I felt the vibration around me signifying the entry morph of an Extinguisher. The idiots never had any idea I could sense much quicker than anyone else ever would. After all, they didn't realize my morphing was enhanced with being part vampire.

It was not well-planned idea. An Original, morphing in to save the day and the good doctor. My smile for Fokusovich was deadly when I pulled the silver boomerang from my thigh-strap and aimed for the area where the Extinguisher's head would be in just a few more seconds.

"Noo!" the doctor screamed too late.

The Extinguisher dusted before he even finished materializing.

I raised my hand to catch the return of my boomerang and returned it to the strap on my leg.

"Order the rest away, or you'll watch them all die before I slit your throat," I snarled.

"Bitch. You'd kill your own kind?"

"With relish. I have no loyalty to those who've hunted me."

"They follow orders. The same way you did."

"If they can't think for themselves, they deserve to die."

"My God. What have we created?"

"Are you kidding me? You deprived human children of emotion, poisoned us with the virus of vampirism, tortured and experimented on us, and then ask what you've created?"

"I made you stronger than anyone in the world. Cutting you off from useless emotions, strengthened you. You have no weaknesses for others to use against you. The moment you grew weak, like with the vampire, it pulled you down. Don't you see that? It's the only way we got you to return."

"So you'll exterminate my...weakness, did you call him?"

"It's for the best, Afton."

"Then, Doctor Frankenstein, perhaps I should exterminate all of your *weaknesses*. Every Extinguisher you ever trained. Every human guard in this facility. Every record, every file, every piece of this puzzle that gives you pleasure. That is your humanity."

He truly looked astounded. "You can't do that! This is government property."

"This is *weakness*, Doctor. Remember?"

"I see what you're trying to do but you'll never get him."

"How about if we trade information? The whereabouts of my vampire, for...the greatest secret you ever wanted."

I let the silence fill the room. His face was interested, almost excited. We both knew what I spoke of. I lowered my pitch to an almost-whisper. "Do you still wonder why, Dr. Fokusovich?"

He stood unmoving, as if even his breathing might distract me. He understood exactly what I spoke of. What was the catalyst?

"Commander," he called out. "Please excuse all the guardage waiting until further instruction."

"Yes, sir."

We waited a few moments until there was dead silence beyond the room from us. Only then, I voiced what he had wanted to hear. "What worked so well with me? Why could you never re-create me? I was your biggest success and your biggest failure. I was pure blind luck."

He nodded carefully, not wanting to appear too eager.

"Watch this," I whispered. Then I ran all across the room, so fast it defied gravity as he knew it. I challenged myself, balancing halfway up on the walls and ended standing directly behind him.

To whisper into his deformed ear.

"I never morphed."

Without touching him, I could feel the vibrations of his heart thumping in his chest. It echoed in my ears, ba-boom. Ba-boom.

Fear.

His voice was incredulous. "That was running?"

"See?" I breathed. "I had skills I hid from you. More than the other Extinguishers. Hidden talents that developed, sometimes overnight."

"H-How?" Although I couldn't see his jaw move, the back of his flat skull did. As if it was one piece, from the top of his head to the base of his neck.

"A combination of things. My mother was raped by a vampire. Which you knew. I'm the product. I shouldn't have been born, but I was. I should have died, but I didn't. Perhaps I wouldn't have even made it to adulthood, who knows? I was probably meant to be more human but you, Dr. Frankenstein, you chose the only half-breed in the world to infect with the blood of a vampire.

"And not just any vampire. The key was, I was stricken with the virus-infected blood of my...own genetic father. The rapist, Ramon Durant?"

I could almost see the wheels turning in his shrunken head. Forgetting his terror, he whipped around to face me.

"My God! That pathetic creature you killed?"

"Yup."

"That is exactly the information I need! We need to find out why the vampire's sperm was compatible with a human egg, then why you weren't some sort of genetic

mutation, an abortion like the rest of the fertilized misbreeds. Why you were more human than vampire, what were the more dominant chromosomes? How did being stricken affect your development and what were the chances that it was your own progenitor's blood we used?"

"No," I said calmly. "You see, I killed Dr. Morozov so the information wouldn't be revealed. The vampire didn't kill him back then, I did. To protect my secret. Now, I want my Ethan," I reminded gently. And punctuated with the slightest press of the blade against his throat again. Enough to draw a drop of blood. Blood was what the good doctor understood. It was the liquid of life. At the same time, I wondered, was my knife sharp enough to decapitate him?

At last he showed his true colors. He squealed, tripping over his tongue to get the information out fast enough. "I'm so sorry, Afton. We didn't realize the information you'd be willing to trade for him! He's drained, his body dumped behind the building at the dumpsters. But I didn't remove his heart, if it hasn't been too long, I mean there might be brain damage, like the one we'd captured before, your father but..."

My knife *was* sharp enough for decapitation.

\* \* \* \* \*

I saw red. I didn't even bother cleaning the dripping blade before I raced to the back exit. A mistake that cost me.

I burst through the back door into a corridor that would lead to the outside. There to confront me was a lone Extinguisher. Dead silence reigned as we faced each other. At this point I realized the mistake I made, for I had been tracked with the trail of blood I'd left.

"Where is he?" I demanded, as if I had the upper hand.

"I am as strong as you, but more trained than you. You think to intimidate me? You're just a little girl."

Why did they always use my size against me? Was it no longer taught as Extinguisher basics, that speed and agility were our first weapons?

"You are wasting my time," I said slowly. "If you are not going to give me information, get out of my way."

He went against all training and struck, hitting me across the jaw and flinging me backward. I jumped to my feet but I was tired. He hit me again and this time I stayed down, flat on my back.

He walked slowly toward me. "You're under arrest, Afton. For the murder of several government officials on this camp. You have the right to remain silent." He grinned. "Even after I tell you your vampire is already dead. I watched it myself. We let him bleed out, figuring we could use the body for some purpose later. Maybe tricking you into believing he lived, hooked to tubes and shown to you through a monitor —"



Lifting both legs, I kicked with all my might. My feet connected with his knees, breaking them with a horrendous crack. His face whitened in shock and he collapsed in slow motion, his knees bending backward as he kneeled facing me.

And facing his feet.

His screams were atrocious, even to my experienced ears. I rose and walked to the back door, slamming it behind me to soundproof the screeching.

It worked.

The silence was blessed for a moment, until the beginnings of anxiety began to hit. Was Ethan truly dead? Was it a trick by Fokusovich?

"Ethan?" I called out, a dreaded sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach.

What was I thinking? How could he respond?

Water dripped. The steady plop-plop echoed the rhythm of my heartbeat. I forced myself to become calm, to breathe easy.

My heartbeat slowed.

I turned the corner. That was where Ethan's body had been strewn.

My heartbeat stopped.

The taunts were true. He lay still as a marble statue. No breath raising his chest, no sight in his eyes.

The ground felt like it shifted below me. Cold terror clutched me with icy fingers. My heart should have started racing but strangely enough, it didn't. Instead my whole body was numb, shocked to the core.

The world felt unreal, as if I were caught up in a dream. He couldn't be dead. I couldn't live without him.

Slowly, I dropped to my knees.

His skin was pale. More so than usual. Had he been entirely drained? Was he completely dead? He couldn't be, for he would have evaporated into dust. There had to be a chance still.

I never stopped to think. I simply did.

I tilted his head back, opening his mouth. Then I sliced my wrist vertically and allowed the blood to gush into his upturned mouth. It drained and drained, while I grew dizzy. The thought constantly swirling in my head was Ethan's greatest fear.

To die alone.

Hot, burning tears cut trails down my cheeks. I couldn't change the events that led to this. I couldn't save him from his horrible fear.

Ethan had died alone.

I wasn't there for him. I was too busy hunting when I should have concentrated on searching instead. A never-ending Extinguisher training that my consciousness hadn't been able to leave behind. Even at the end, the damn Academy won. They completed my transformation to where my human emotions had been left behind.

My Ethan. Had his last thoughts been filled with the terror he'd never admit to? His greatest fear?

I lowered my head to his chest to rest, careful to keep my bleeding wrist in his mouth. He had to wake soon.

I still had to tell him I loved him.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Is it awake?"

I was vaguely aware this time the small voice sounded scared, not disgusted like before.

So long ago.

"Do you guys congregate anywhere other than caves?" I managed to say, through lips that were a little hard to manipulate.

"Afton!" A warm ball of energy tumbled into me, a little too enthusiastically for my tender muscles.

Jordan.

And then remembrance hit me. Where was Ethan?

I gasped and sat up. Lightheadedness hit and the world swam as the child was pulled away.

"Easy, *bella*."

I whipped my head toward the voice. "Ethan?" I whispered against the dizziness.

"Yes, my love. Relax, now."

"Come to me." I had to make sure he was real, not just a dream I'd made up. He stroked my fevered brow. "It worked? My blood?"

"Yes. You gave too much blood, Afton."

I knew what he meant. I traded his greatest fear for...my own. It took me a few more seconds to ask.

"Did I die?"

There was a long pause. The rest of the noise in the cave subsided completely, as if everyone strained to listen. Whether it was to witness my reaction or the answer, I couldn't tell.

Ethan's expression was carefully measured, showing no emotion either way.

"Yes."

And yet I rose.

I took a deep breath. "Then we both traded in our fears. You no longer fear dying alone and I no longer fear death. Now we can begin anew."

"Begin anew?"

"Yes," I murmured. "The old life is behind us. Ethan, I can't live without you. You don't have to follow me around any longer, because I will never leave you."

His lips hovered over mine. "It is about time, my love."

\* \* \* \* \*

My stomach was in knots.

"What is taking so long?" I muttered, pacing the floor.

The old French woman who sat across the room laughed softly. "Relax. Nothing is taking long, you just don't primp as much as normal brides. I've never even seen a bride wear her hair loose! Why, it's scandalous," she teased.

"I like the white flowers in your hair," the child on her lap said shyly.

I'd refused a veil. The tiny, white, star-shaped flowers had been twined through my dark hair. My dress was bright white, loose and flowing, so different from the tight black outfits I always wore. It hardly looked like me, Ethan would be so surprised.

"Thank you, Leyna," I said, looking at the sweet child. Her twin sister was silent, a thumb plugging her mouth, her left hand clutching an Extinguisher Barbie. Huge brown eyes stared from beneath the curtain of blonde hair from the face of the doll to my own.

I hoped she wouldn't make the connection.

"Neveah!" Leyna snapped, like the bossy mother figure she often was. "You weren't supposed to bring the dolly to the vampire wedding! Mom said so."

Neveah said nothing, her eyes huge. So different from her twin sister, much much smaller, her movements quiet as if she didn't wish to call attention to herself. The only thing they seemed to share was the shade of hair. And although hers was growing, it was still much shorter than her sister's. And where her twin's eyes were blue, hers were a dark, somber brown. Endless pits to lose yourself in. And whereas her sister chattered incessantly, the tiny twin never would utter a word.

"Ssh, it is all right. The vampires won't mind," their nanny said, rocking the two on her lap. "Everyone here in the village knows vampires are not scary."

"No, the Extinguisher was scary," Leyna said. "She blew up the whole camp of humans and killed herself too. Her eyes bled," she continued. "When she cried. They killed her lover and she bled."

"What do you know of lovers, little girl?" her nanny said, tickling her abdomen.

"Mommy told me," she giggled. "But now the Extinguisher can rest in peace. No one hunts her anymore. 'Cause she destroyed the camp, so there's no more of the black Extinguishers who hunt the vampires. Burned it to the ground, so no other village children can be kidnapped in the night. And people were scared, 'cause the vampires were loose but they never hurt no one. And even the police stay away from them."

"Non, the vampires come into towns whenever they wish now. There is no one to wait in the shadows and exterminate them. The vampires dole out their own justice within their race should naughty little vampy children misbehave."

"Mommy says prejudice causes our fears. That's why she bought Neveah the doll."

Neveah continued to look from the doll to me, piecing things together. As always, the one known as the quiet twin didn't say a word, allowing her sister to speak for her.

The eerie notes of the organ drifted up the stairs.

"There is our cue," Nana said. "Come, Leyna. You are tossing the rose petals first, to show Neveah how." She lifted both children to their feet, then took Leyna's hand, heading out the doors of the room and to the spiral staircase, leaving Neveah with me.

"Come," I instructed the smaller twin left behind. We walked to the top of the stairs also but instead of watching the child who strew petals in the walkway, I looked down at Ethan.

His enhanced vision connected with mine. He stared, stunned.

I glanced down at myself. The dress began as a strapless corset of white silk that wrapped around my breasts and tightened down to my waist. From there it flowed down to my ankles.

I had never worn white. In fact, I'd never worn anything but black.

His eyes were filled with love. This was the best moment of my life. I blew him a kiss, feeling my eyes overflow with the beauty of him.

Blinking, I squatted down so I was eye level with the child whose name spelled *heaven* backward. "Are you ready?" I asked, even though I knew N-338 wouldn't answer me.

Again, she looked down at her hideous doll. Then she placed it gently on a nearby stand where a basin of holy water sat. She grabbed a tissue from the nearby box and turned to me.

Pudgy hands reached tentatively to my cheek, wiping at the salty trail I didn't realize was there.

The white tissue was stained pink in the wet spots.

Silently, she turned and descended the stairs to join her sister.

## About the Author

During my daytime job, I explore people of all types. At night, I love to read.

Why did I start writing? My favorite authors were all between books and I twiddled my thumbs until deciding, "Hey, I can do this for someone else out there who's waiting for a new release too!" My favorite authors in no particular order include: Kim Harrison, Laurell K Hamilton, Jim Butcher, Charlaine Harris and Kelley Armstrong. So obviously, I cling to urban-fantasy-type work with one difference—I'm a romance author at heart. I must have my happy ending with Prince Charming. And no, it doesn't matter if he has fangs. Or fur. As long as he's naked, we'll be just fine! Therefore, Ellora's Cave seems a perfect fit for my work.

Join me for a few hours and get lost in my worlds. For now at night, I love to write!

Rena welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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